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# People Sitting in the Dark: Stories

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December 2016

To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Trent Chabot entitled *People Sitting in the Dark: Stories*.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillments of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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# PEOPLE SITTING IN THE DARK: STORIES

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

Master of Arts

In English

Winthrop University

December, 2016

By

Trent Chabot

## Abstract

In my story collection, *People Sitting in the Dark: Stories*, I explore the ever troubling theme of how to cope with loss, and occasionally, how to cope with not losing when one is so accustomed to it. Though some of my stories are connected with reappearing characters, they are not all written in such a way. Characters in the background of one story may be given the narration of one later in the story, thus changing how the reader views the character through different perspectives. I wanted to explore how point of view can drastically change the sympathy and empathy readers have for characters, and how this change can cause the reader to feel uncomfortable. The uncomfortableness resulting from the realization that everyone, characters in fiction and people in real life, all have warts, and we all have bad things about us. These characters are human beings, and creating flawed, gross, and gritty characters that reflect reality cause the readers to question themselves, and to question those around them they've improperly judged or thought of. Through exploring my unlikable characters and characters that have experienced loss, and how they react, I've explored what happiness in the human experience truly brings out in fiction, and how it can reflect the reality we all inhabit.

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## People Sitting in the Dark

I've seen America with no clothes on. I grew up never knowing we were the dregs of society until I was rescued from my biological father when Mom finally met my step-father, my Dad. Dad had worked his entire life on trains, fixing them when they weren't running properly, while Mom stayed home and turned being miserable into a full-time job. Now Dad was dying and nobody had any idea how to make it easy for him, so Mom made us all come back to Pittsburgh one last time.

I arrived a few hours late, because let's face it, nobody really wants to spend time with their family. I mean, once you're over the age of eighteen isn't half of the fun of life supposed to be never having to see these people again? I had hit traffic, or so I would lie. In reality, I stopped at a Burger King, which I haven't done in almost eleven years—huge mistake, the Whopper tastes like a hairy turd between two manila folders—just to avoid these people. My people. These people make me try to redefine what the word family actually means. It seems more like coincidence: oh, hey we have the same parents; that means having to pretend to like everyone forever, even though they used to throw my bike in the lake after school so I would have to walk home, and then my father would kick the hell out me for coming home after dark, and he was already six bourbons deep, so restraint for hitting a six-year-old was already out the window. I'd take one of my father's hard left hooks right in the jaw and flop down the spiral stairs, my shoes kapowing on each step. To this day, I still get a bit woozy walking up spiral staircases. All those weeks of dwindling down a spiral staircase took a toll on my brain. I'd just be rolling quickly down the steps, my limbs flailing around, and somehow end up at the

bottom, bruised and broken, forced to pick myself back up to take another beating. Once Dad showed up and my father was history, life became more manageable for six-year-old me.

And there they were at the restaurant, already at lunch without me. Mom, John, and Miranda. No idea where their five kids were. I guess Corinne and Dad—dying Dad—got stuck with them. The poor guy probably had an oxygen mask on, slinging around that goddamn tank trying to wrangle five kids at once.

“It’s about time this guy showed up,” John said.

I awkwardly waved at my brother, giving his wife a half smile and an eyebrow raise. She flashed back one of those smiles—a real genuine, white, toothy, smile—and I immediately felt bad for the fake shit I had mailed her way just seconds before.

“Hey, Mom,” I said.

“I was just bragging on you. Telling John all about your girlfriend and how you finally met her parents. I am so excited for you, Gil!”

“Just her father, Mom,” I said. “She doesn’t have a Mom, remember?”

“That’s just the saddest thing,” Mom said. “I mean, what in the world, I can’t even imagine. I mean, honestly, can you guys imagine if I hadn’t been around for your childhood, and Dad had to do everything? I mean, can you imagine!”

Mom did this sometimes. She acted like she was the greatest mother we could’ve possibly had. Just ignore the fact she never protected us from my father and the nightly beatings for stuff we never did. Ignore the fact she was never truly around. I guess she was in a physical sense, but I don’t think she ever truly forgave herself for marrying my

biological father and subjecting us to his wrath. Never had a vacation. Never had a fucking birthday, really. No money, she used to always say. Meanwhile, she'd magically acquire a brand new purse of some brand I could never bother to learn the name of, and my father had enough for a bottle or two of Black Velvet on a daily basis while he cashed checks from the lawsuit that he won that granted him a nice yearly payout in cash. They've never told me the full story, but John claims our biological father was hit by a taxi while he was drunk, but he sued the taxi company—and won, no less—and now gets a nice cash payout each January. Go figure.

“Anyway, like I was saying before Gil interrupted, these faggots just keep ruining the sanctity of marriage,” John said. “Honestly, how are we supposed to take these people seriously? The purpose of marriage is to reproduce, which they can't do. Why the hell should we grant these people equality?”

If anyone knew how to reproduce it was John; five daughters all under the age of six. He's a deeply religious guy, and doesn't believe in any form of birth control outside of abstinence. He and Miranda abstained from sex before marriage, and it got so bad after the wedding that they had to attend sex therapy because John couldn't view her in a sexual manner, and had to be convinced he found her attractive.

“I'm not tipping this faggot shit,” John said.

“Has the service been bad?” I asked.

“What's that got to do with it?” Miranda asked.

“Well, everything, I think,” I said. “This guy needs money to survive, I would guess. He isn't bringing you your nine-dollar cocktail because he wants to.”



“You been here three minutes,” John said. “Already acting like you’re better than us, huh? You haven’t even been. Maybe the service was crap.”

“Maybe it was, but you said that wouldn’t matter anyway.”

John paused to take a sip of his drink. I wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but it was tall, pink, and had a whipped cream afro adorning the top of the glass with three cherries parading atop of the cream.

“Are you a faggot, Gil? Is that what this is all about?” John mocked. He gave me a droll smile, lumped his hand into a fist, and rested his head on it while he stared at me wide eyed like a bad cartoon.

“These people, Gil, they’re diseased,” John said. “They don’t know what’s wrong with them. They claim they’re born with it. Maybe they are. It’s a birth defect. They need to be cleansed. They sit around and act like we’re oppressing them, but they ain’t right, Gil. Do we see the handicapped claiming we’re holding them down? No. Because they know. They know, Gil. Think about it. They know how fucked up they are and they accept it, and they try to get help.” He kept pointing to his head like it was helping further his argument.

“Yeah, Gil, seriously,” Miranda said. “Like, John has these two doctors under him at the hospital. These gay doctors. They work in the exact same hospital with him. And they’re the nicest people, like, when Gianna got sick they knew exactly how to make her feel better. But their lifestyle just makes it really hard to be friends with them! It’s just so gross.”

“John, you never told me you were the boss of some gay people,” Mom interjected.

“Oh, we don’t really mention them,” Miranda said. “We just have to tolerate them. They also live in our neighborhood.” She made a face as if they just somehow accidentally turned up in their community like swine flu.

“Exactly. I can’t be around them for more than five minutes I can feel it fucking crawling on me,” John said.

I stopped trying to convince John that the homosexual community is filled with normal people years ago. It’s odd, the one thing he despises the most in the world is the one thing he wants to discuss all day long. Sometimes it’d be nice to just have a normal chat about beer or sports or fucking grocery shopping instead.

“Oh my gosh, did you guys see this?” Mom turned her phone around to make a real spectacle of whatever news story she thought was more important than us, the people she hasn’t seen all together at once in probably four years. “Someone murdered three Christians in Syria. That is just awful. We need to pray for them.”

“Those fucking terrorists. I can’t believe we let them just run the world,” John said before taking a long sip of his drink and motioning for the check.

Mom was always about prayer. Pray for this, pray for that. Praying to fix the world’s problems seems a lot like trying to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop without actually licking it. I pondered if I’d somehow been adopted as a child as the waiter brought the bill and John used his math skills to round up to the next dollar leaving the guy a solid forty-six cents. I hung around to use the restroom while my family—my

people—walked back to Mom’s house, and I threw a twenty on the table before exiting the tiny restaurant.

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Back at the house, my sister, Corinne, was waiting outside, presumably for me. Her hair was tangled, almost like she’d been electrocuted just moments before, and in this house, I mean, shit, you never know. Her eyes had dark rings around them, like she’d dressed up as a raccoon for Halloween a few months early and forgot to take the make-up off. But who am I to talk? Ever since college I’ve gone up four pant sizes, and I had no concept of what shaving actually was. I don’t know if I could even remember how to shave my face if I had to do it.

“I didn’t think you were actually going to come!” Corinne yelled as I walked up the gravel driveway.

I gave a dry smile and threw my arms up in the universal give-me-a-hug symbol. I actually liked this one. She was gentle, and sweet, and actually reached out to me every once in a while. She would stop by my apartment in Attleboro and have dinner with me and Sunshine, my wife, a few times a month.

“You get stuck watching John and Miranda’s girls?” I asked.

“Well, I offered. Anything to get out of that lunch.”

“If I knew you were gonna be here I would’ve just come straight here and skipped lunch,” I said. “But that’s what I get for calling Mom instead of you.”

“That’s right. Maybe you’ve learned your lesson this time,” she said.

“Please tell me Chris is inside. I need a fucking beer,” I said. Chris was Corinne’s husband. He loathes spending time with our family so much that he always has these magical business trips whenever there is a get together.

“Oh no, he didn’t come. He got stuck in Phoenix for work. You didn’t bring Sunny?”

We both laughed and headed inside.

The inside of Mom’s house looked like a bed and breakfast from hell. There was cereal plastered on the ceiling where milk was also dripping. I’m assuming this was the handiwork of one of John’s girls. The air conditioning wasn’t turned on and it felt like a sauna in every room you entered. I couldn’t wait to take a dump later and bake like a hot pocket in that cramped space. Mom’s bathroom was smaller than an airplane bathroom. John was laying on the couch channel surfing while Miranda tried to dress her five kids, one of which just ripped her diaper off like she was the Incredible Hulk. A few feet away another was covered in powder sugar from a bag of donuts. I gave up trying to remember which girl was which after the third one. They all look alike, and they all act like maniacs and I can’t be bothered to remember who they are anymore. Except for Gianna, because, well, Gianna loves me. Always has. No real explanation, she just does. Gianna was the fourth youngest of the girls, coming in at just around two years old. We didn’t see each other too often, but she was always giddy when I showed up. A look of panic showed up on Miranda’s face as the Incredible Hulk ripped off yet another diaper and scampered away.

“Do you want some help, M? I can take some of them outside or something,” I offered.

“Do you mind? I mean, I got it, but if you want to, I mean.”

“Yeah, no problem. You seen my dad anywhere?”

“I think he’s out back.”

I wrangled up Gianna and threw her on my back like a baboon and grabbed the Incredible Hulk off the floor, carrying her like a loaf of bread under one arm, while I carried a clean diaper in my mouth. Bagofdonuts tried to follow us out, but I blocked her path with my foot. Out back, Dad was sitting on the patio drinking a beer.

“Miller Lite? When did you start drinking beer?” I asked as I wrestled the Hulk to the ground for a clean change.

“Doctors told me to lay off the liquor.”

He removed his oxygen mask to take a sip of beer, before replacing the mask and inhaling deeply. My dad’s skin had begun to turn in on itself. He didn’t look like a skeleton, to call him that would be an insult to actual skeletons, but he looked rotten. From the inside out, in the way an apple browns when it’s old, bruising on the outside after its insides turn into complete mush. Seeing my father like this made feel a pang of guilt for not being around. At sixteen, I’d had enough of my mother, and I left, graduated high school while living with a friend, and didn’t come back until after college. Each reunion since has been like tearing a bandage off an old wound, and I don’t think Dad ever truly forgave me for leaving.

“How was your drive in?” Dad asked.

“It was okay. No traffic. Just downloaded some sports podcasts and drove.”

“You see the Pirates game the other day?”

“Which one? I saw the one that Cole pitched, but I haven’t seen much the past few weeks. Kinda crazy at home,” I said.

“Yeah, the Cole game. What a stud that kid is, huh? What’s he, twenty-four, and he’s probably up for the Cy Young this year if he keeps it up.”

“Oh yeah, especially when he has that fastball going like he did Tuesday.”

“Everything’s okay at home, though? What’s going on?”

“You know, just same old same. Sunny sends her regards, but she couldn’t make it, unfortunately.”

Dad laughed and said, “Yeah, I’m sure. Maybe soon, though, yeah?”

“Something like that,” I said and smiled at him. “You look good, Dad. I mean, all things considered.” I reached my hand out and placed it on top of his so our palms could touch, and he nodded before Mom began yelling for him to come inside to help her with something.

Dad rose slowly, his bones audibly cracking as he straightened out. He moved toward the door, his massive oxygen tank closely behind him in tow. He made an unintelligible sound and headed inside. He barely had enough strength to slide the patio door open and between herds of coughs he yelled for Mom.

“What do you think, G? Should we go inside or stay out here and be cool by ourselves?”

“Hey!” Incredible Hulk growled at me, a pout on her face.

“And you, of course,” I said jokingly and she smiled.

Gianna looked up with a jack-o-lantern grin on her face. Her one tooth jutting out of her mouth like a tombstone. It was the type of grin only a child could give, the one only someone that hasn’t yet been chewed up and spit out by everything they loved could hand out. I picked her up and kissed her cheek before putting her back down to hug and wrestle with the Hulk.

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“Dinner’s almost ready,” Miranda called from the kitchen.

On vacation—if I can call this a vacation—my family takes turns cooking dinner each night. It was a fairly dumb practice since almost nobody could cook except for Dad, but Mom thought it built camaraderie. One of those beliefs she held for no apparent reason other than to avoid having to actually cook herself.

I’d been bouncing the Hulk on my knee while watching the Pirates get their asses kicked by the Cubs. The Hulk went into hysterics when I stopped to get up and go to the kitchen table, so I threw her onto my back and let her play the drums on my head while I sat and waited.

“What’re we having?” I asked.

A cold silence answered my question and I got up to grab a beer from the garage fridge, shoving the Hulk into John’s arms along the way.

“Hey, grab me a beer, would ya?” John said.

“Miller or Two-Hearted?”

“What’s the difference?”

“One is beer, the other isn’t.”

“I’ll take the one that isn’t,” John said.

I grabbed him a Miller and went back to the table as Miranda was placing a pan of baked chicken onto the center of the table. It looked undercooked, but she’d been working all day in the kitchen so I kept my mouth shut as I filled my plate.

The sound of people chewing filled the room. My family had this odd understanding that nobody talked during a meal. We all sat there, chewing our food, nobody speaking. It was the only time we ever got the entire family into one room and we spent it stuffing our fat fucking faces with more food we didn’t need. The silence usually ended when Mom had taken four bites and decided she needed to be doing something her mouth again. Ever since I was born Mom hadn’t rested her mouth for one second. Even when she slept she would grind her teeth all night, always working her jaw, always moving.

“Something wrong with the food?” John asked as he eyed Mom.

“What? No, it’s wonderful.”

“You ate three bites.”

“This is good,” Corinne interjected.

“No, it’s not,” John said. “It’s fucking shit. Did you even cook this?” He glared at Miranda who hid her eyes beneath her vined bangs.

“John, it’s fine,” I said.

“And what do you know? You a five-star chef now too, huh?”



He grabbed the pan of chicken from the table and dumped it into the garbage can, pan and all. He stomped around the kitchen table attempting to dump the contents of everyone's plates into the garbage can as well.

"We're feeding everyone cat food on our night for dinner because you can't cook properly," John screamed.

"I'm sorry, honey," Miranda said. "I thought it was fine."

"Well, it's ruined now," John said.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't put good food onto everyone's plates, though, does it?"

"John, calm down. We can order a fuckin' pizza or something," Dad said. He coughed and took a handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe his mouth as black goo formed in the corners of his lips.

"No, we shouldn't even need to order pizza. It's a waste of money," John said.

"Relax, I can pay for it," Mom said.

"Fuck that, Mom. We aren't poor. We don't need a handout, we can pay for it," John said. His face reddened, but it was tough to discern if it was from embarrassment or anger at this point. Mom had just offended John, but she meant well, I think. Mom always solved most of John's problems with money, despite that John made more money than anyone in the family. Mom's disconnection with us kids since we were young has bled into our adult lives, and she simply doesn't know how to communicate with us as people. She doesn't even really know us as people. Outside of our names and where we live, I'm not sure Mom could name a single hobby that any of us have—fucking baseball,

or beer, or watching kids be kids—and whenever these reunions go awry, this disconnect begins to show, and it just makes me sad. Sad for myself. Sad for John. Mostly, sad for Mom. She wasted her entire life feeling sorry for herself, for feeling sorry for us, but instead of vocalizing it and reminding us that she loved us, she just kept quiet and suffered. We all suffered.

“I didn’t mean it like that, John,” Mom said. “You know that.”

The Hulk, who was splayed across the floor coloring the tile of the kitchen with a red sharpie, began to cry which set off a chain reaction symphony of yells and tears from her siblings. Mom got up and went into her room to look up more horrible news stories on her phone, while Dad closed his eyes to suck more oxygen, most likely pretending he was off somewhere far away watching the Pirates with a glass of bourbon in his hand.

“You had one job today, and you ruined it. Congratulations,” John sneered.

John noticed the artwork Hulk had left on the tiled floor and got inches from her face to chastise her. She could probably tell you what he ate for dinner the week prior with how close he was to her face, just screaming at her. Gianna got up from where she was crying across the room and went over and smacked John in the face, one of the boldest moves any two-year-old has probably ever made. John picked her up by the arm, dragging her along the floor like a doll, and sat her down in the closet in the living room. He closed the door and held the door knob shut from the outside, staring at us as he was disciplining his child.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said, getting up from my chair.

“Stay out of this. This is my family and I can do whatever I need to fix it.”

“No, you really can’t,” I said. “She’s a kid, John. Fucking relax.”

“Fuck you, Gil,” John said. “You ain’t shit, and you don’t know shit about parenting, or anything with this family.”

I crossed the room and John moved toward me. He screamed at me, letting me know I had no rights and that I was violating his as a parent, and Bagofdonuts latched onto John’s legs. John pointed at me, his fat fucking sausage fingers beneath my nose, and he dared me to make the first punch. The Hulk clung to my legs, bogging me down like cement shoes, as I trekked across the living room to the closet. I tripped under her weight as she continued to cry. I picked myself up off the carpet, and moved around John, who grabbed me by the nape of my shirt. I removed Gianna from the closet, who looked at me with a tight line across her face where a smile had been permanently plastered just a few hours before. John looked at me, a tear beading in the corner of his eye, and his grip on my collar lightened, and I saw the anger flush out of his face. Before Dad showed up, our biological father, he used to get shitfaced on whiskey and make us fight. Just two young kids—John a bit older than I—and he’d make us fistfight. One night, John hit me so hard in the face that I chipped one of my back teeth and lost another. After that, he swore he’d never hit me again. That’s what he had told me as I spit blood into the sink while our father, he just leaned back in his recliner and laughed, muttering something about getting us ready for the real world. Here in this room now, John had to be thinking of that night, too. I pressed my head into John’s chest. A way of surrender. Something we’d learned to do after the chipped tooth incident. John stopped, let me go, and he went outside shortly after.

Mom popped her head out of her bedroom, yelling across the house, “Oh my gosh, guys listen to this: A Christian in Uganda was murdered this morning by a Muslim man for sharing their faith. How awful! We need to pray for them.”

I looked up at my mom and shook my head.

“What? What’d I miss?” she asked.

“Nothing, Mom,” I said, laughing at the pure stupidity of this moment. “Really. Please never change.”

“Oh, Gil. You’re such a sweetie,” Mom said and she put her arm around me, not knowing that this may have been our first hug—or, at least something resembling a hug—in almost a decade.

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“I’m sorry,” John said as I walked towards him.

“It’s okay. I knew you weren’t going to hit me.”

“How?”

“When we saw Dad for the last time—not Dad, but, you know what I mean, the other one—you always told me you’d never hit me again. You know, after he used to make us fight each other when he got drunk when we were kids. I knew you meant it.”

“Jesus, that was fucked. Who does that to their kids? I think about it every time I close my eyes at night,” John said. I couldn’t tell if he meant it, but he at least he’d made an effort to be peaceful just now. He looked older than thirty-five now that I was really studying his face under the streetlight.

“Yeah, me too. I’m just always afraid I’m—we, really—are gonna turn into him. It makes me protective of your girls, I guess,” I said.

“Listen, Gil, I appreciate it. Really, I do,” John said. “But they don’t need protecting from me. Maybe other people out there, but not me. No, sir. Maybe you need some protectin’ from me though, know what I’m saying?” He mimed like a boxer and softly hit my arm, forcing a smile from me I didn’t want to give.

We stood there, underneath that streetlight, pondering our childhood honestly and openly for the first time since we were in elementary school.

“You still smoke?” he asked.

“Nah,” I said.

He tilted his head and smiled a bit before I conceded and pulled a pack from my pocket and slid one into his hand.

“You’re predictable as fuck, you know that?” he said between clenched lips as he attempted to light his cigarette in the windy street.

I nodded as I positioned myself adjacent to him to block the wind, and I slid a cigarette into my own mouth as well.

“I’m really glad you’re my brother,” John said, stopping to take a drag on his cigarette. “I know we had our differences before, and that we don’t always see eye to eye, but I am glad, I think.”

“Thanks. I guess I’m glad, too.”

“You motherfucker,” he said smiling and play punching my arm again. “I’m also sorry about what I said to Sunny, you know, last time we saw you guys. I didn’t mean to belittle her beliefs. I’m sorry, I think,” John said.

“It’s fine, John,” I said.

“I’m sorry, really, I am.”

“I know. Stuff your sorries in a sack. It’ll be okay. Just give it some time.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Time.”

\*\*\*

I rolled around on the trundle that Mom had given me, and I couldn’t sleep. The blanket was sticking to my skin like glue from all the sweat seeping out of my pores. The trundle had about three wires and bars in it that were trying to escape and they were jutting out into my body, trying to impale me and play the xylophone on my ribs.

I eventually gave up sleeping and went downstairs to find some water and some medicine, any medicine, that had some drowsy side effect listed on the label. In the kitchen I found my Dad sitting at the kitchen table alone, the dirty dishes piled in the sink behind him giving off a pungent odor of filth, quietly breathing to himself in the dark, so I flipped the light on.

“Gil? The fuck you doing?” he asked.

“I’m looking for something to kill myself with, Dad,” I said smiling at him.

“Sit down, Gil.”

“Dad, I’m just—”

“Sit the fuck down, son,” he whispered.

I sat down.

“So what’s up, huh? I feel like we’ve barely talked since you been here.”

“Not much to say really. This went about as well as expected.”

“I’m dying, son. Give me something positive,” he said laughing quietly.

“Well, the Pirates got their asses kicked earlier, but you know that already.

Football season is around the corner, right?”

“Fuck the Steelers.”

“I will never understand your absolute hatred for football.”

“A bunch of gorillas beating each other for a quarter of the pay of baseball players. Bunch of morons, if you ask me. If you can play football you can learn to hit a baseball. Play a real fuckin’ sport,” he said.

I looked at him, this dying old man, and couldn’t help but laugh that the only thing bothering him at 3am after the day we just had, is that football players are too stupid to realize baseball is a more lucrative sport.

“How are you and your girl? What’s her name again?”

“Sunny. We’ve been together since we were seventeen. You’ve met her like fifty times, Dad.”

“Yeah, I know, son. You know my memory,” he tapped his head with his finger, “it ain’t what it used to be. So, she’s good?”

“Actually, Dad, we got married last year. At the court house. We figured we’re twenty-seven, it was time to settle down.”

My father went silent and breathed his oxygen slowly. The sound of him inhaling made time feel like it was going at a fraction of the speed it normally moves.

“I would’ve invited you, but we didn’t really make a thing of it. It was just us.”

That was a lie, though. Corinne had come to be our witness.

“Yeah, Corinne told me.”

“Of course she did,” I said.

“Don’t be mad at her. She means well. She invited me to go with her before it even happened. I didn’t want to ruin your day.”

“Well, thanks. You should’ve been there, Dad. I’m sorry. Mom, too. I just, you know, I was angry still.”

“I know, son, I know. One day you’ll understand where anger gets you. And it isn’t to happiness. You guys gonna have kids, you two? You think that’s smart? I mean, after today and all, you still want those things?”

“That’s the plan,” I said. I wasn’t even sure if it was true. Life had ripped my throat out and shit in my windpipe so many times that I’m not sure if populating the planet with more people is exactly what I need right now. People I’m again forced to care for. Dad and I remained quiet for the next few minutes and it was nice. Probably the nicest time we’d ever spent together. Just two people sitting together at a table sharing a slice of silence and breathing in each other’s oxygen breath after breath.

“You remember that baseball game we went to together? You know, the one right after the strike in ’94? In Pittsburgh; opening day against the Expos. It was the first time



we really got to spend time together without your mother watching us like a hawk the entire time.”

“Yeah, I remember, sort of. I was only seven, though,” I said.

“We were sittin’ there, Expos just got a hit; those fuckin’ Canadian pricks. They get this hit, a measly single, whatever, and the crowd just goes nuts. We’re still pissed about the work stoppage from the year before, and they gave out these stupid flags to every fan before the game. You know, real small things, with the pirate skull logo on it. Anyway, fans just start ripping the sticks off that’re holding the flag up, and start chucking ‘em on the field. Booin’ everything. Booin’ so loud and throwin’ so much shit onto the field they had to stop the game and the umpires told the crowd if we didn’t stop they’d forfeit the game in favor of the Expos. The Expos’ fans start booin’ as loud as they can, and these umpires realize how dumb they sound with their empty threat. Never make an empty threat. I always told you that growing up, did I not,” and he wagged his finger at me as he said it. He stopped the story to breathe and cough and brown mucus dribbled from his mouth a bit before he started up again, “And these morons, the umpires, just stay standing on the field. At this point, fans are running out of sticks so they get creative. Batteries, pizza, beer bottles—I think they stopped serving beer in the glass bottles in Pittsburgh after this game—but these people were angry. You gotta understand, son, how angry they were. Angry about the strike. Losing an entire season of baseball. A bunch of bitchin’ millionaires on the field while I could barely afford the hat on your head. And then, from nowhere, some crazy bastard throws a hubcap from the upper levels. A hubcap! Just flying through the air like a fuckin’ UFO. It almost hits the umpires, and

they run for cover. Took ‘em almost twenty minutes to sort this whole thing out. I think eventually everyone just ran out of energy and it wasn’t fun anymore. And we lost that game. We lost. We lost because the Expos were better that night. But I tell you, son, it was the best damn game I ever been to.”

Dad finished and he looked as if he’d just been thrown from a train. He was a pile of broken bones, his skin lazily draped over them like a tarp. Death had him, and he just sat at the table quietly sipping Miller Lite and breathing. Just breathing, only stopping to laugh quietly to himself at this memory, this memory of us, this memory of me. He wasn’t doing anything special other than sitting there trying not to die. And he was right. We were there at that game with the hubcap and the little plastic flags and the Expos and the anger and we were angry, too. We stood for something. We were there despite our anger. We swallowed it and we choked on it to see the Pirates do what we loved them for doing, and we showed up. We were there. We were really there.

### My Son, the Potato

My son is a goddamn potato. He doesn't have a clue what year it is. Not a shred of an ounce of a pound of what day of the week it is. The spud probably doesn't even know his own goddamn name. But he's my son.

And he's a goddamn potato. He's going to be in a hospital, then a recovery center, then most likely hospice care until the Reaper finally claims him. He doesn't really deserve a fate different than that anyway. He's a goddamn potato, because he's also a goddamn monster.

He'd have to be to do what he did. To do what he did with his own goddamn hands. His big man hands, sliding his fingerling alien fingers where they don't belong. I can't live to think about it sometimes. What he did. What he had been doing. For weeks. For months. Maybe years. Nobody gets caught the first time. I told him that when I caught him smoking cigarettes in middle school.

Now he's just a potato living in a hospital. He's the potato from elementary science class. You know the one: you get a potato—any old fucking one will do—you stick some wires into it. One positive, one negative. You set up a battery to the side. You touch the wires to the battery, and it lights up like a Christmas Tree on the goddamn fourth of July. You take out a wire and the whole charade falls apart. But my son, the potato, doesn't get to fall apart. I don't know if he's earned that right.

So, that's son number one: the Potato Monster. And on the other hand I've got his niece now under my care. She was the daughter of my other son, the Louisville Slugger. If you've turned on the news anytime in this fucking town for the past two months you

know the story. He came home to find his brother's fingers where nobody should've ever found them. Not at that age. Not with that girl. Louisville Slugger tells the story a wee bit different than I do, but his version may be more accurate. I'm not a scientist. I'm not a detective. I know grief changes people. Changes their perception. Changes their story. But one part of his story is accurate. He bashed his brother's brains in with a baseball bat. He turned his brother into goddamn mashed potatoes. I don't blame him for it. I would've done it for him if he'd just asked. But he never did.

But now it's just me. The father of a potato and a baseball bat. And I'm no longer alone anymore. You see, Louisville Slugger and potato's mother passed almost a decade ago. Horrible smoker, the mother of the potato was. Lung cancer, they'd said. No fucking shit, I'd said. She didn't want the radiation. She didn't want to try to outlive her disease. She accepted death, the mother of the potato did. Removing her oxygen mask and smoking cigarettes. She'd cough up black mucus like gravy and spit into cups for me to dispose of. But the potato refuses. He does not relent in the Reaper's face. He remains alive to this day. A fermenting spud clinging to life from the battery placed next to him. Just like in fourth grade. I never consented the potato in fourth grade if he it wished to become unlit. To fall apart. I never thought I had to. Potatoes never had any rights back in those days. I merely removed one of the wires and the lights inside dimmed to a halt. No slow fading, just gone. Out. And then it was over and the goddamn potato was gone.

### God Hates Cleveland

It was still an hour until tip off, and Dad was already ashing his cigarette into his coffee. This was the moment he'd waited his entire life for, he said. The moment that his father had waited his entire life for may God rest his soul and goddamn it he would've deserved it, he said. We were born and bred and exiled in Cleveland and we deserved this, he said. It was game seven. LeBron James had come home. Cleveland deserved this. I know we deserved this, and I didn't need Dad to tell me that.

"Where's Joe?" I asked.

"He's on his way, Jerry," Dad said.

"He better be," I said. "If he ain't here and we lose because he had to get his nuts licked, this is on him. He can take the heat like Bartman did back in Chicago."

"He'll be here," Dad said.

We'd watched every game of the finals together. Me, Dad, and Joe. Occasionally, Dad's whores from earlier in the day would stay for a little bit, too. Ever since Mom died when I was eleven, six years ago, Dad didn't want commitment. He just wanted someone to make him a sandwich and suck his dick every now and then. Okay, maybe not exactly since Mom died, but it started a few months after.

"I fuckin' hate this prick," Dad said. He pointed his cigarette at the television, motioning at some goofy old white dude giving his takes on basketball. "It's a black man's game. The fuck he know about it?"

"Why are we watching pre-game, anyway?" I said. "We ain't done it all series long. Why start now?"

“Good point,” Dad said as he shut off the television and got up from his chair. He screamed across the trailer and walked over and pounded on his bedroom door. “Hey, Betsy. Hurry it up in there, yeah? You gotta be out by game time.”

“Oh, fuck you, Tony,” Betsy said as she swung the door open. “I’m on my way, just gimme the cash.”

Dad pulled a wad of perfectly rolled bills from his pocket and put it in her hand. Dad always told me you don’t pay a woman to fuck you, you pay her to leave. She kissed his cheek and he slapped her ass and she squealed a bit. Then she left the trailer.

“Thank god she’s gone,” Dad said.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have much to say about Dad and the whores. I still missed Mom. I know Dad did too, but he never expressed it outwardly. Her clothes still hung in his closet. Sometimes I noticed that the whores would take a shirt or a jacket home with them from the closet. I don’t think Dad really minded. He wanted to get rid of the clothes, but he couldn’t do it himself.

“Where the fuck is Joe?” I asked.

“He’ll be here.”

Dad opened the fridge and motioned back to ask me if I wanted a beer. I nodded and he came back with two of Fat Head’s finest. Dad’s favorite brewery. Dad always said to drink local. Fuck the big companies. We may not live in mansions, but the least we could do is spend the extra ten bucks to help the other assholes in our community live comfortably, he said.

He cracked my beer open with his teeth, spit the cap into the sink, and slid my bottle to me across the kitchen table. I grabbed a glass from the cabinet nearby, inspected it, and poured my beer into it.

“Is this what we drank for game six?” I asked.

“I think so,” Dad said. “I bought the same stuff yesterday that I did on Thursday for the game, so we should be good.”

We clinked our glasses, and we just sat there looking at each other. There weren’t many words to say at this point. We’d played one hundred games this year, and this next one needed to be magical. Needed to be the game that the Prodigal Son had promised when he came back. When he came home. To finish the job, unfinished business, he’d said. To relieve sixty years of suffering for our city, he’d said. To relieve the six years of my own. If he could come back and bring us joy—bring me joy, bring Dad joy—then anything could come back.

“Your mother would’ve loved this,” Dad said. “Never a bigger Cleveland fan in my lifetime than that woman, I’ll tell ya.” Dad wasn’t even really talking to me when he said this. His eyes were glazed like a donut, and he was staring at the wall behind me. He wouldn’t make eye contact. Didn’t want to have the actual talk about Mom being gone. It felt like Dad always felt the need to justify that he still loved Mom every time he fucked someone that wasn’t her. He didn’t know I didn’t care. I understood. I understand. I’m seventeen, I know how a prick works.

“I know, Pop, I know,” I said.

“The Browns,” Dad began. “She loved the Browns. And for what? For some rich prick to take ‘em away? They left and she cried. She goddamned cried. Your mother, god bless her soul, was fuckin’ dying of cancer, her breasts removed, and she didn’t shed one fuckin’ tear. Not a one. And twenty years ago she was weeping over a sports team leaving. She knows how we feel right now. We deserve this, Jerry.”

I remember when Mom was dying. Her big bald head was like a goddamn cantaloupe. I’ve never seen something so sickly. It was like she wasn’t human. After some of the radiation and the therapy, she looked at my Dad and told him she didn’t want to do it anymore. No more, she said. The puking, the weakness in her joints, and the fucking crying from everyone else finally got to her. That was the clincher, I think. Dad would go into her hospital room, her bedroom, or wherever the fuck she was staying at the time, and he’d cry. He’d cry and apologize. There Mom was, fucking dying, and she was making him feel better instead.

It was seconds until tip-off when the front door flew open, and I saw the heel of Joe’s boot. He came rambling into the trailer with a six pack under his arm, a cigarette held between his lips, and his Varsity jacket from high school was packed to the stitch with pepperoni sticks.

“Step right up you big goddamn apes,” Joe yelled. “I got ya pepperoni here. Got ya Jackie O’s. And goddamn it, I brought the motherfuckin’ Noize.”

“It’s about fuckin’ time, Joe.” I said. “You’re barely here in time. We lose and this is on you.”

“Oh, fuck you, Jerry,” Joe said. “You ain’t even old enough to know the pain.”



“Give it a rest, Jesus,” Dad said. “Let’s get ready for the game. Come on, will ya.”

“Hey, Jerry,” Joe said. “Go on. Ask me if the Noize got any play this week. Ask me.”

The Noize is how Joe referred to his dick. He did the same bit every time he meets someone for the first time. He just waits for someone to ask why he calls it the Noize. Why, you ask? he’d say. Because whenever I give it to her I just yell, *Cum on, feel the Noize*, he’d say. Goddamn bastard.

“I don’t give a fuck, Joe.”

“Too bad. I made this one broad, bless her, she felt the noise, and both these fists, baby,” Joe said. He set the beer down on the table and let the pepperoni sticks fall out his jacket, then he took his fists and mimed like he was Rocky Balboa slamming them against a massive slab of raw meat. “Oh yeah, didn’t even know women could make that sound, know what I’m sayin’? Who knew fists could fit into such tiny holes, aye boys?”

“Shut up, Joe,” Dad said. “Jesus. Crack your fuckin’ beer and pull up the table from the wall over there. We ain’t moving except to piss and get beer. Just like game six.”

“Jesus, okay, guys. Just trying to have a little fun. I’m here. Let’s go. Game seven. We got this,” Joe said.

“We ain’t got shit,” Dad said. “These fucks won seventy-three games. Who are we, anyway? We’re goddamn Cleveland. We’ll find a way to fuck it up.”

“‘The Fumble’.”

“Jesus, can you believe the Browns fired Belichick?”

“Christ, don’t remind me.”

“‘The Drive’.”

“Fuck, that was Mom’s favorite to harp on.”

“I don’t blame the broad.”

“Watch your fucking mouth.”

“Goddamn it, I hate Elway.”

“Shit.”

“Fuck.”

“What about the Indians this year? They’re in first place.”

“The defending goddamn heavyweight champions of the world are behind them by half a game. They’re done. Cooked like toast.”

“Who gives a shit, anyway. Mesa will find a way onto the fuckin’ team, just to blow the save in the bottom of the ninth in game seven of the goddamn World Series.”

“Will you two give a rest?” Dad said.

The air felt heavy, but Dad brought us back. It was time for game seven. The moment of redemption. The dream was about to, hopefully, become reality. When I was little, before I was ten or so, Mom always told me that our dreams told the future. That when I laid my head down to rest, all the good stuff came true. All the nightmares and the problems were someone else’s lifetime. Like I was looking through a window to understand other aspects of the world. But my dreams were real. They were tangible things that came to me one day with a long enough wait. I dreamt of a lot of things as a

boy, and a lot of things as an adult, but a championship hadn't come yet. Maybe this was the year.

Dad turned the volume up, and the announcers let us know that the Oracle Arena was louder than it had ever been all season. No shit, Joe said. It's game seven, of course it is, Dad said. The players were circling the center of the court, waiting for the tip off, and Dad's leg was jittering from the fourteen coffee and cigarette combos he enjoyed in the last hour.

"How are we supposed to win?" Joe said. "Only 'Bron has ever played in a game seven out of anyone on the Cavs. That's madness."

"Shut up, Joe," Dad said. "We deserve this. Those entitled pricks in Golden State, they don't deserve it. It's simple karmic balance. Look at our team. A bunch of hard workers. Young kids coming together around one guy, making it work. What're they? A bunch of silver-spooned yuppies. All of 'em."

"Yeah, I fuckin' hate Curry," I said.

"He looks like he'd suck dick for bus money and then walk home," Joe said.

"Don't even get me started on the fans," Dad said. But he didn't need us to get him started. He got himself going, anyway. "Those assholes out there, living in perfect weather, following the perfect team, and their perfect families. Fuck 'em. They don't know what it's like over here. Picking up trash. Cleaning toilets. Making the city run. Everyone in California just thinks their city is a self-cleaning machine—"

"Like one of them new toilets from the infomercial," Joe said.

“Yeah, just like that,” Dad said. “But us? We make the world run. We deserve this.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. Maybe to myself, maybe to them. “We do.” I knew we had a chance to win. Hell, anyone has a chance to show up and accidentally win something off pure chance. Just show up, Mom always said. The worst thing you can do is to not be there, Mom used to tell me. When I was really little, back when we still lived in the city, Dad used to work late. It was before he started being the collector that hangs off the back of the truck picking up the bags from the side of the road. It’d just be Mom and I at night, and we’d read books together. Dad wasn’t much for reading, and I really wasn’t either, but Mom liked to, so I’d hang around and read magazines while she would read her books. She went to a book club with some of the other wives, but she’d just complain that they were all just there to get away from their husbands. Didn’t even read the damn books, she’d say. We never really talked much when she was reading, but it was nice to just be in the same room with her, something I can’t do anymore. It might’ve been quiet, but she showed up.

It was halftime and we were down seven. It felt like the game was already slipping away, and there was still an entire half to be played.

“Goddamn it,” Joe said. “Can somebody please kick Draymond in the dick before he makes another three?”

“Someone has to help LeBron, or we’re done.”

“Like a fuckin’ steak, I’ll tell ya,” Joe said.

I remember when LeBron left Cleveland the first time. You'd never know it by the way people around here talk about him now, including Dad and Joe, but he was exiled by the city. Dad and Joe, and some of the other guys from the trailer park, they made a bonfire and burned all their LeBron jerseys, some shoes, even some posters. It went up in a great ball of fire, and they cheered, dousing the fire with gasoline like it was a grill, cheering louder as the fire got bigger. Mom had gotten sick a few years before that, and we'd had to leave the city, too. We moved outside of it, into the trailer park. Mom's bills were piling up. Mom had to stop working too. I wasn't remotely old enough to get a job that wasn't under the table, and Dad didn't want to be in the city anymore. I think a part of him is convinced Mom got sick from something in the city. Like moving away would cure her. LeBron came back after spending some time in Miami. Learned how to win, Dad said. It's like when you break up with a broad, and then you get to bang her years later and she knows so many new tricks, Joe said. He was welcomed back like he never broke our hearts in the first place. Like he never found something better and said, catch ya in the next life. That's what Mom told Dad before she died. That she'd be waiting. Waiting and watching.

Late in the fourth, the game was tied. Dad sweated through his tank top. He looked like a trailer trash cliché. His mustache was drenched, his forehead looked like a waterslide, and on the opposite side of him Joe was mosquito eyeing the television like a drunkard.

“Shit.”

“Fuck.”

“It’s getting away from us,” I said.

“We don’t need your negativity,” Dad said. “They’ll be okay.”

“We’ll be okay,” Joe said.

And then it happened. ‘The Block.’ The play that would go down in history.

Iguodala passed to Curry on a fast break. Curry gave it back. Iguodala had an easy layup. LeBron was sprinting from half court when Iguodala began his motion for the layup, yet somehow LeBron got there first. Finally, Cleveland—we—had a signature play that didn’t involve a massive collapse. The Cavaliers scored on the next play, and the Warriors couldn’t score for the remainder of the game. It didn’t matter that Kyrie Irving scored the winning basket, and not LeBron. That someone else had made the dream a reality. It didn’t matter that Kevin Love ran onto the court to celebrate before the game was officially over. It didn’t matter that Cleveland hadn’t won anything in fifty years. It didn’t matter.

The buzzer sounded, and Dad slapped Joe across the face. A real hearty one, and Joe laughed. He slapped Dad back and they both turned to me with grins the size of a hot dog. I didn’t know if they were going to slap me too. They both ran out the front door, like their routine was rehearsed, and Dad hopped into the front seat of his car, a Dart from ’67. His most prized possession. Everybody in the park knew that. He blasted the horn and Joe was dancing on the outside. Hop-stepping like a dumb moron about to score his first touchdown in college. Next door, Petey, who lived in the black trailer, did the same. He linked arms with Joe and they spun each other around, all the while Dad was wailing on the horn, his head hanging out the side window laughing, his mustache flaring

and sweat dripping down his forehead. Frankie-Four-Beers, the guy who lived a few trailers down and almost never came outside, he started blaring on his horn, too, and before I knew it there was a symphony of horns throughout the trailer park. Probably seven different horns just sounded off, all of them with multiple old farts dancing around each car like a campfire. The people that made Cleveland spin around with the rest of the globe—the garbage men, the paramedics, the janitors, the miners—they were all here yelling and dancing. I had no clue if this was how you were supposed to celebrate a championship—to celebrate the end of suffering—but it was how we were doing it now. Just a bunch of prematurely balding old men with women problems and kids they didn't want, sounding their horns and watching their neighbors dance like jackasses. I don't think this was how I dreamt of a championship, but sometimes people forget their dreams, and sometimes people wake up never realizing just how lucky they were to have dreams at all, and sometimes I wonder, if things like this can happen, and if one man can return and bring so much happiness to so many men at one time, why can't other things return, in one way or another, to bring joy to one household, too?

### Are You Osama?

I'm a product of partition. When Pakistan was formed in '47, my grandparents were born. Punjab was split down the middle, people scattered like ants or bees, and ran off in the middle of the night to their new homes. The rest of the family trickled down, and my father and mother eventually came to America. My father runs a small sandwich shop in the market of our neighborhood. Every morning he flips on the OPEN sign, does his work, and he comes home to eat dinner with my mother and myself. His English is superb. My mother's not so much. She doesn't get out much except to drive me to the expensive white people school outside the city limits.

The towers fell when I was sixteen years old. I was nowhere near New York City, but my brother, he went to a prep school there. Stuyvesant, my mother always called it. They turned his school into a triage for a month. They'd get burn victims, smoking lungs, people burned from the inside out, people drowning in ash. But they went to class as normal in trailers at a school a few miles out. They brought in shrinks for the students, and my brother, he didn't see one, but maybe he should have because he was different. He looked the same when I saw him a few months later, but a different man was behind his eyes, as if he was encased in ice and couldn't escape. He stopped making jokes about being brown skinned, and he didn't want to play video games with me anymore.

When it came out that the acts were orchestrated by men who looked like me, my life got confusing. I had friends like Andrew and Fred who didn't want to come over anymore. We used to eat breakfast together and ride our bikes to school during the week. We'd ride home after and stop at my father's shop to get candy or sodas or sandwiches,



but now I did it by myself. From then on, my family were all Osama. I was Osama. The Sikh man who sold newspapers on the corner was Osama. My father was Osama. My brother was Osama. We were Osama. I started to believe that we were Osama, asking my mother at night, “Are you Osama?”

My father put out a big bright American flag over his shop. My mother ironed my khakis, and I started combing my hair instead of letting it run wild. It made me look less like a troublemaker, my brother used to tell me. My father started shaving for the first time in his life on a daily basis. He made comments to others about paying his taxes, and he changed his name from Farooq to Frank. My mother began helping out in the local community to help white people tutor their unwanted daughters in math. My mother told me I could no longer walk around the streets by myself after my father’s friend was beaten to death while walking home from work. I was no longer allowed to bike to school, and Dad would drop me off before he opened the shop in the morning. We removed words like ‘bomb’ from our everyday vocabulary, and I phoned my brother more often than I had before.

This girl, she was in my grade. We went to the same expensive school together. We were the only non-whites there. She was also from Pakistan. I’d been to her house a few times when we were younger when our parents were closer friends. She used to spend her afternoons correcting her father’s English. We grew closer, but not because we enjoyed each other’s company. For the rest of the school year, we only ever looked at our classmates and yelled, “I’m just like you” as best as we knew how. Her father got

deported after he was labeled a pest, and she stayed here with her mother. She never had to correct her father's English again.

But everything is okay. Because I still get to eat dinner with my mother. And I still get to help her learn English, so she can continue to tutor white people's daughters, so she doesn't get labeled a pest and get us sent back to Pakistan.

### Service Time

Today Sunshine would see her husband Gil return from Fort Myers, where he had been working the past month as a freelance journalist. She'd been eagerly awaiting his arrival two days after he left. The entire time away had been time for herself. At least alone as one can get while pregnant. While he was away she'd missed her period, which caused her to visit a doctor some two weeks later. She was pregnant and she had an ultrasound to prove it. She had a tiny human growing slowly inside of her, and she'd kept the ultrasound hanging on the refrigerator since coming home from the doctor that day. It greeted her every morning. Though she and Gil had not been trying to have kids, she knew Gil would be just as happy about the new baby as she was.

"You gonna tell him I took his place while he was gone?" Corinne asked.

"Shit, I'm not even going to tell him I saw you, period. He'd fucking flip out if he knew I was still associating with you guys," Sunshine said.

"Whatever. He needs to get over it anyway. It's been like, what, three years since it happened?"

"Fucking Trump. That goddamn election just tore your family apart," Sunshine said.

"The cracks were already there, girl, don't you worry," Corrine said. "Trump just took a hammer and finished us off. And Gil was right. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a liberal, and I believe in God the same way Mom does, and the same way John does, for the most part, but I just couldn't support someone like that."

"Like Gil or like Trump?"

“Very funny,” Corrine said.

“You want more wine?” Sunshine asked getting up from the table.

“Yeah, I’ll go get us two more glasses. You stay here,” Corinne said.

Sunshine removed a pack of cigarettes from her purse and packed them firmly against the palm of her left hand. She thought about her doctor’s words to avoid smoking—especially in the third trimester—and the words chilled her spine. She slowly slid a cigarette from the package and inserted it before lighting it and inhaling deeply, slowly.

The front door to the bar opened and Corinne returned from inside to the patio with two glasses half-filled in deep red. “Here you go,” she said. “Mind if I bum one?” Sunshine held out the pack, but Corinne waved it off, “Jesus, reds? I’ll grab something on my way after. How’s work going?”

“Good. I did a few grafts today, lot of consulting. You know, the super jazzy stuff that people in my field hate.” Sunshine worked as a periodontist. Her first patient of the day was set to have a tissue graft along his upper gum line. He had a bad genetic disorder, but the aggressive way he brushed his teeth like a maniac compounded the problem, and now his gum line was eroding at a heightened rate. Since the erosion was isolated to above only two teeth, Sunshine could use the patient’s own tissue to fix the issue. She would make a small incision in the roof of the patient’s mouth, carefully remove the tissue, and place it over the eroded gum line. After patching up the new hole in the roof of the patient’s mouth, she would stitch up the tissue over the erosion, and over the next two weeks the tissue would fuse to the original gum line, thus fixing the erosion and

creating a brand new gum line for the patient. In essence, the patient's own tissue would fix itself, and all Sunshine really had to do in the process was put everything in the right place. The patient essentially fixes themselves.

"Sounds like a blast. At least the hours aren't bad," Corinne said.

"Yeah, never thought of myself as anything other than a nine to five type of girl, but I like the long hours and long days off."

"Shit, don't we all."

Sunshine looked at the cars passing by from the patio where they sat overlooking the busy street below. The speeding cars reminded her of Gil, who was probably on a train speeding towards her at this moment. She tried to imagine his reaction when she showed him the ultrasound. She'd kept it a secret. She wanted to see his face when she showed him, not just some stupid emoji he'd send back if she sent the photo to him over text message instead. She saw his smile appear, exposing the gap between his two front teeth that he hated so much but that she loved. She saw his eyes glass over a little bit as he attempted to understand what body part was what in the photo. He'd ask her questions and point to random things and look at her with earnest questions and her replies would fill him with joy. He'd wonder when it had happened. Which time it was? How far along is she? Oh, three months, then it couldn't have been the time before he left for Fort Myers. The time when he couldn't get his dick hard and she'd told him it was okay and he'd thrown his beer glass at the wall in frustration as he stood up towering over her with his large naked body apologizing for not being a "metal-rodded boner machine," as he had put it.

“Yoohoo, anyone there?” Corinne said bobbing her head back and forth in front of Sunshine’s glassy eyes.

“Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking I probably shouldn’t have had the second glass of wine. You want it?”

“I don’t turn down free wine, but maybe you need it more than I do. You seem nervous,” Corinne said.

“I’m fine, really. Please, drink it. It’s on me. I got this one,” she said getting up from the table.

“No no no no no,” Corinne said frantically opening her purse and trying to find her debit card. “Goddamn it, if I put this thing back where I always put it I could find it.”

Sunshine laughed and went inside to pay the tab, signing her name on the receipt as Corinne arrived at the bar.

“Damnit, Sunny. You’re too quick for me. Next time is on me. I’m serious.”

“Yeah. I don’t know when that’ll be. You know, with Gil coming back and all.”

“How much longer is that jackass really not gonna want to see me? I’m cool. I’m hip. I don’t like Trump either,” Corinne said.

“It’s not personal. It’s just complicated, you know that,” Sunshine said.

“Tell him about the hayride when you see him. Come on, just tell him, please?”

Sunshine had gone with Corinne and her husband, and a few of their family friends that have small children, to a festival while Gil was gone. They’d gone on a hayride in March, which seemed odd at the time, but the weather was nice. They didn’t have any kids, but Corinne loved hayrides, so she offered to take some of the kids on a

hayride with Sunshine. While they were on the hayride, a man in a Trump shirt walked in front of the hayride, causing it to come to a halt, while the old man driving the car they were all sitting in the back of sat silent. Corinne spoke up, yelling at the Trump man, that this was a place for kids, keep your politics out of it. The man shouted back, grabbing his dick through his overalls, and the old man driving the hayride maneuvered around him. We weren't allowed to take the kids on anymore hayrides after that.

“I promise I'll tell him about the hayride,” Sunshine said.

“Oh my gosh, really?”

“No,” Sunshine said. “But I promise I will see you soon.”

“We'll make it work,” Corinne said as she motioned to Sunshine she was headed to the bathroom, and then she walked off.

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Gil was among the first of the people to depart the train from a car at the far end of the platform. Sunshine spotted him and despite her want to contain her excitement she shot her arm up and waved it to grab his attention. Gil saw her arm waving and gave a polite nod and put his head down as if looking at his own feet to make sure he was going somewhere he wanted to actually go. He was wearing a shirt and tie, his blazer strewn over his shoulder, and he was clean shaven. Sunshine noted that he looked as if he'd lost maybe ten pounds or so while he was gone.

“Gil!” Sunshine shouted as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Oh my gosh, I haven't seen your face like this since high school.” She slid the back of her hand against

his cheek. “Wow, so smooth. Did you shave for me?” She smiled and leaned back to glance up at his face without taking her arms from his neck.

“I shaved for work, but we can pretend it was for you.”

“It’s nice to see you too,” Sunshine joked.

“Give me time to recuperate. I missed you, geez, babe,” Gil said.

“I’m just joking. Relax, honey,” Sunshine said patting his chest with one of her hands as she kept the other one around his neck. “So, did you get the book I sent you?”

“Yes, I got the book,” Gil said removing her arm from around his neck.

“Did you like it?”

“I haven’t even gotten to open it yet, babe.”

“You said you were bored. I thought you had some free time. I’m sorry, Gil. I would’ve just given it to you when you got home.”

“I was going to read it on the train, but this fucking asshole had his ringtone on the entire time. Literally, every time she got a text message her phone would just scream, ‘Marlene! Marlene! Marlene!’ I can only assume it was her name and she’s too fucking dumb to know her own phone is going off.”

“That’s a real bummer, honey.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t have been so bad, but she was basically having a full blown conversation with someone so it was going off just about every thirty seconds. Dumb fuck. Some people just have absolutely no concept of self-awareness. Just be courteous. Everyone gotta fuck up everyone’s day around them just because they’re pissed off.”



Gil's voice sounded rehearsed. Like he'd been practicing this little routine for Sunshine to make her laugh, like he was a stand-up comedian and this was his bit.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. One of my patients the other day kept trying to talk to me, and I'm like, dude my fucking gloved hands are inside your mouth. Every time you move your lips I'm liable to poke you somewhere you don't want to be poked."

"Yeah, that's not really what I mean, but I know what you mean," Gil said.

"Oh, yeah, my bad," Sunshine said. "I was thinking we could get dinner before going home," Sunshine said.

"Do we have to? I just got in. All I want is to go home, put on some gym shorts for the first time in a month and watch a movie."

"Come on, we haven't seen each other. It'll be fun."

"Alright, fine," Gil said. "But at least make it somewhere I can get a decent beer. I've had enough liquor this month."

"I thought you were working, what were you doing drinking the whole time?"

"It's just sort of how it goes, babe. You have to go out and hang with all the scouts to really know what's going on. Like networking stuff, you know?"

Sunshine doubted this, but let it slide. She knew Gil liked to drink, but she also knew he liked to talk baseball more than anything. Before Gil left for Florida he complained that Spring Training was ultimately a waste of everyone's time. Nobody that actually mattered played more than a few innings a game, and anyone who showed promise was sent back down to the minors to prevent having to pay them as professionals

later instead of sooner. Gil had made it seem to Sunshine that being sent down to Spring Training was more a demerit than a great thing for his writing career.

Sunshine reached her hand out and laced her fingers between his as the two walked from the train station to a nearby bar. His hand felt lax in hers, so she gripped it tighter and pushed her head onto his shoulder as they walked. She gave the appearance of attempting to get warmer from his body heat even though the weather outside was comfortable anyway.

“Excuse me, miss,” a voice said near them. The voice belonged to a man sitting down against the concrete building. He had a thick black beard, his balding head like a grape. “Excuse me, miss, do you have any spare change?”

“Just ignore him,” Gil whispered.

“I’m sorry, sir, I don’t,” Sunshine said.

“The fuck did I just say?” Gil said.

Sunshine had broken off from his arm, and crouched down beside the man. “I can offer a cigarette though?”

“That’d be lovely, miss,” the homeless man said. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

“We just giving hand-outs to anyone now?” Gil asked as they walked away.

“It’s a cigarette, not a hand-out. Besides, you’re the liberal.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Gil said.

“Care if I grab a smoke, too, before we go in?” Sunshine asked.

Gil grunted and put his hands up in defeat after a look from Sunshine. She shook her head and offered him one from her pack, but he waved it off and removed one of his own from his jacket pocket.

“Camels?” Sunshine said. She scrunched her face in a confused contort as she spoke. Gil merely looked at her with a raised eyebrow and lit his cigarette. “I just didn’t know you switched, that’s all.”

“So,” Gil began, “how was work while I was gone? Everything good?”

“Yeah, same as usual, I guess.” Sunshine took a drag off her cigarette and spit on the ground.

“Please don’t spit.”

“Since when has that bothered you?”

“It’s gross.”

“Okay,” Sunshine said. “Sorry. Work is good, though. I had to do a gum graft this morning.”

“Nice. That’s good money, right?”

“Money is basically the same for us no matter what. We’re always steady.”

“Well, yeah. Now that I’m working we should be fine.”

“We were fine before, too, you know.” Sunshine spit again and looked up at Gil to smile at him, but he was looking down at the ground as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Did you miss me?” she asked.

“That’s a stupid question,” Gil answered.

Sunshine thought he was joking, but he never laughed or even smirked. Sunshine couldn't discern if it was a stupid question because of course he would have missed her—she was his wife after all—or was it stupid because they'd been fighting for weeks, and maybe the time apart was necessary. Gil's Spring Training assignment had come at the perfect time; Gil had pent up anger about working eighty-five hours a week while Sunshine made almost twice as much money despite working half the hours. He came home each night in a terrible mood and took it out on Sunshine, but she knew the time away would bring back the real Gil. She knew the pregnancy would make everything okay. It had to.

Inside the two sat at a table in the corner of the restaurant. One of those tables with the fake candles in the center to give it some faux fancy ambiance.

"Your server will be with you shortly."

"Thanks," Gil said without looking up from the menu. "I hate this place."

"Babe, we can go somewhere else. It's not a big deal. I thought you liked it here," Sunshine said.

"I do like it her, but I still hate it."

"Sorry for the wait, folks. How are we today?" the waiter said as he arrived to their table, clumsily pouring water from a tin pitcher into the couple's glasses.

"Fine. I'm going to do the, uh, shit, what IPA you guys got?"

"Right now we have the Whalers IPA on tap, and we have an assortment of cans if you'd prefer that instead," the server said.

"Which Whalers IPA?"

“I will have to check on that one, sir. I do not know which exact one it is, I just know it’s the Whalers something IPA.”

“The Whalers is fine, thanks. And my wife will do—what’s your house Pinot?”

“Oh no, I don’t need a drink honey,” Sunshine said.

“Nonsense,” Gil said.

“We don’t actually have a house Pinot, but I really like—”

“Yeah, that’s fine, just bring it out. If you like it I’m sure it’s fine,” Gil said.

“Gil, I really don’t think I should be drinking.”

The waiter awkwardly stood there caught between two orders from his patrons.

“Get the wine, please,” Gil said to the waiter curtly before making a face at Sunshine. “What the fuck, babe? Just take the wine.”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Sunshine said and she looked down at her lap where she began rubbing the nails from her thumbs together. She would dig one nail underneath the other until the pink in her nails turned to white from the pressure. Then she would switch them and repeat the process.

“So, tell me everything about Fort Myers,” Sunshine said.

“What’s to tell? I went and watched baseball, wrote about it, talked to some people, and that’s about it,” Gil said.

“Oh, come on. Give me some of the juicy stuff.”

“It’s Spring Training. Not much juicy stuff going on. It’s mostly guys who aren’t even going to make the team, and the occasional guy who is good enough to make the team, but the team will put him in the minors anyway.”

“What, why would they do that? They don’t want to win?”

Gil huffed audibly and looked at Sunshine, “Alright, so basically, when you’re drafted you’re stuck on the team that picks you and then signs you for six years. Not six years from the time you sign, but six years from the time you actually make the major league team. There are a lot of intricate rules and loopholes, they’re called super-twos and stuff, but it’s a bit more complicated and it’s probably not really worth going into. But, essentially, you’re stuck with the team who drafts you for six years and they can basically pay you garbage until that time is up.”

“But what about free agency? Can’t they just leave?”

“No, that’s what I’m saying, babe. What, you go deaf while I was gone?” Gil said moving his hands frantically. He looked like he was attempting to hold an invisible basketball. “They can’t leave. You’re stuck for six years. The team can just renew your contract for almost the league minimum and you just have to deal with it. There’s arbitration and back pay hearings and stuff, but nobody really knows what goes on in those things unless you’re super plugged in. Somehow they’ll just come to an agreement that keeps the player happy so they’ll resign after six years is up.”

“Why would they go back? If the team just keeps giving them pennies, why not leave? Oh, thank you,” Sunshine said as the waiter set the drinks down.

“Anything to eat today, folks, or are we just drinking?” the waiter asked and laughed a fantastic fake work laugh. It really was an art, to fake laugh for money.

“We haven’t even look at the menu, sorry, we just got to talking,” Sunshine said and the waiter walked off smiling. “Sorry, you were about to tell me why they’d go back if the team treated them like crap.”

“Right, that’s the thin line teams have to toe with really good young players. Like, when Mike Trout and Bryce Harper were both like nineteen they were two of the best players in the league. The Nats have kinda pissed off Bryce by never giving him a contract until his time ran out, and he’s gonna leave if things don’t change. He’s almost up for arbitration, which is basically a meeting where they can agree to pay them more than the league minimum, but it’s still shit pay. But anyway, the Angels, on the other hand, took care of Trout and that’s why he’s there for the next half-decade, at least. Trout had every reason to stay, and Bryce has every reason to leave.”

“Oh, I see. So it’s kind of like a balancing act.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Gil said.

“You sound so important and smart now,” Sunshine said slapping his leg playfully under the table. “Maybe I got some competition in this relationship, finally.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gil asked furrowing his brow and tilting his head slightly to the side.

“Oh, you know. You’re a working man now. This is exciting! You like your job. You have passion. You get to write. And you get to write about baseball. It’s exciting, honey. I’m just teasing you, Gil.”

“What the hell, babe.”

“I’m just picking, Gil,” Sunshine said wide-eyed. “I’m just saying you sound really confident and knowledgeable. I like it.”

“Yeah? And how does a confident and knowledgeable man sound, might I ask? Because what the fuck was I before?”

Sunshine saw that he was frustrated and a little bit hurt. “I’m just saying you sound happy, Gil. I like to see you passionate. It makes me happy. It makes me feel safe.”

“Whatever, babe,” Gil said, and he lifted his beer to his lips to taste it. “Fucking hell, it’s the white IPA.”

“Is that the sweet one?” Sunshine asked.

“Yeah,” Gil said as he placed it back on the coaster aggressively.

“Relax, honey. Why are you fussing and messing up this evening? Just tell me what’s wrong. If I knew I could probably fix it. Unless it’s just the beer. And if that’s it just order something else. It’s four bucks, honey,” Sunshine said.

“There’s nothing wrong. I’m seriously fine. God.”

“Can you please just tell me so I can make it better?”

“Why do you always have to fix things? Just let things be. Nothing is wrong. There is literally nothing to fix,” Gil said.

“I went house hunting again while you were gone,” Sunshine said.

“Great,” Gil said looking at the head on his beer.

“I found this one adorable place,” Sunshine said. “It’s one story, but it has one of those hangover garage things, what’re they called again?”

“A Carport?” Gil said.



“Yeah, one of those. And it has four bedrooms. I sent you the link, actually, did you ever look at it?”

“What do we need four bedrooms for? There’s two of us and we sleep in the same bed.”

“I don’t know. You never know I guess. Did you even look at it, Gil?”

“No, Sunny, I didn’t look at it,” Gil said. “I didn’t have five minutes to myself, and if I did I wouldn’t be using it to look at some piece of shit in house in a town I don’t want to live in.”

“You don’t even know what it looks like.”

“All your houses look the same. Brown and a fixer-upper. Sound about right?” Gil said.

He was halfway right. Sunshine had been searching for the perfect house for them. For their family, and nothing was ever the perfect she needed. But the realtor showed her this one. Told her it wasn’t that great. It definitely needed some work. Old lady before, she used to smoke a lot, so that was a problem. Maybe tear the whole thing down if you’ve got a spare half a million, and just start over. But Sunshine saw the carport, and she saw the pictures the old lady still had on display in her house. The faces of children, grown up and young, plastered throughout the house. And the smell of the smoke dissipated, and it didn’t matter anymore if the house wasn’t in a good neighborhood, or that the floorboards were faux wood, or whether the front door faced south or north. She wanted that house.

“What is your problem, Gil?” Sunshine said.

“I don’t have one. What’s yours?”

“You changed, Gil,” Sunshine said. “That’s my problem.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, what the hell are you even wearing? A tie? You didn’t work today Gil. You flew on a plane to come home.”

“You’re the one who told me I was a slob and needed to dress nicer.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean like, every single day. And I never called you a slob. That’s extreme.”

“I don’t even know what that means, babe.”

“Stop calling me babe. Jesus Christ, where the hell did you pick that up? I’m not your babe. I’m your wife.”

“So this is about my clothes?”

“You don’t even get it,” Sunshine said. “I just don’t even recognize you anymore. Where is my flannel-in-July-wearing-husband that chain smokes cigarettes behind my back and drinks five beers whenever we get an hour to grab lunch together? Where is the guy who doesn’t shave for weeks and then huffs when I complain about it scratching my face when I try to kiss you?”

“So let me get this straight: you want the alcoholic, chain-smoking, lying husband that I used to be and you complained about all day long?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Fuck you, Sunny. I changed for you.”

“Oh, cut the shit.”

“I’m sorry I’m better now. You just can’t handle the fact that I actually have something good going for me for once.”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?” Gil said.

“You just aren’t you anymore. I miss my fucking best friend.”

“How about you’re not my babe and I’m not your friend, yeah? I’m your husband.

And conversely, you have not changed. You’ve been wearing the same fucking dresses for ten years. You’re still the same goddamn victim that you’ve wanted to be since the day I met you. I’ve always supported you in whatever you wanted to do. Not what we wanted—what you wanted. So don’t fucking yell at me for changing into something better and just because I’m not a fucking sad sack of shit that you can rescue one day with all your super powers, or whatever.”

“Please don’t yell at me like that here.” She thought of all the things he’d supported her through. The things he wanted to mention, but wouldn’t. Like how he worked in a bar and a grocery store just to pay for her schooling when her loans weren’t enough. How they’d waited to have kids until she was done. How they’d had the abortion when he didn’t want to when they were in college. About how he was always there whenever she thought about her uncle and what his big hands had done to her when she was a child.

“Oh give it a rest, Sunny. You just laid into me already. They’re already staring anyway. Just finish your drink and I’ll see you at home.” Gil stood up and threw his

credit card down on the table before beginning again, “Actually, don’t come home. Just take my card and get a hotel somewhere. I don’t really need to be with you right now.”

“Gil,” Sunshine began.

“I said just leave me alone, please.”

Sunshine felt the photograph in her pocket and wanted to thrust it in Gil’s face. Just to show him. Just to scream at him, “Here! Look at what you created. Look at what you put inside me and left to rot while you went off doing whatever you wanted to do.” But she didn’t. Instead she rubbed the stem of her wine glass and kept pretending to take sips until Gil was out of the restaurant, and she packed up her purse and threw her cardigan over her shoulder as she motioned for her check.

“Ma’am, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just ready for the check. You can take it right up,” she said handing her debit card to the waiter.

“Ma’am, your food isn’t even out yet.”

“It’s fine. We’ll pay for it, just don’t bother bringing it out.”

She paid the bill and called an Uber outside before telling the driver she needed to go see her husband’s sister at the Pavilion apartment complex.

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“What’re you doing here?” Christopher asked.

“I just need somebody right now,” Sunshine said. “Is Corinne here?”

“Yeah, inside.” Christopher opened the door and Sunshine remembered how broad his frame was. Christopher used to compete in body building competitions when he

was younger. Nowadays he worked as a personal trainer. He was the type of guy who would do squats until veins were popping out of his ass.

“Thanks, Chris,” Sunshine said.

“You need me to kick someone’s ass for you?” Christopher joked.

Sunshine shook her head meekly and stepped inside. She’d never actually been inside Corinne’s apartment before, but she’d picked her up once or twice. Corinne made toddler and infant clothing for all the local boutique shops. Sunshine was shocked that it looked like a sweatshop inside. Corinne’s sewing machine sat at the desk in the corner of the living room, an ironing board lay out in the middle of the room, and stacks and stacks and stacks of unused fabric adorned every corner.

“Wow,” Sunshine said looking around.

“Excuse my mess,” Corinne said laughing. “Nobody ever really comes here, so, you know, it looks like this.” She spun in a slow circle with her arms raised as if showing Sunshine her kingdom of sadness.

“Yeah, it’s a real joy living in a sweatshop,” Christopher said as he walked into the bedroom.

“Fuck off, Chrissie,” Corinne joked. “I’m just working. Come on, I’ll put a pot of coffee on.”

“Oh, no coffee, thanks,” Sunshine said.

“Tea, then?”

“What’re you working on now?”

“Just some birthday outfits for some rich lady’s bratty kids. You know, the usual.”

She placed her hands on her hips and looked Sunshine up and down before raising her eyebrows and asked, “So what’s up, man? What’re you doing here? You look sad.”

“Me and Gil had a fight.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Corinne asked. “I mean, of course you do, that’s why you’re here.”

“Do you think I’d be a shitty mother?” Sunshine asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Like if I had a kid—if me and Gil had kids—do you think I’d be good at it?”

“It’s not about being good at it,” Corinne said. “My mom was ‘good’ at being a mom, but she was a really fucking bad mother.”

“I just have nothing to compare to,” Sunshine said. “Just, you know, my mom dying before I ever really met her and stuff with my dad and just, you know, never having real—,” Sunshine said.

“Look, you are a—”

“Trainwreck?”

“No, you are a—”

“Mess?”

“I was just going to say that you’re an incredibly determined and gifted person. And if you woke up tomorrow and decided you wanted to have kids I know you wouldn’t half-ass it and you’d be really fucking damn fabulous at it,” Corinne said.

“You think?” Sunshine asked.

“No, I don’t,” Corinne said rolling her eyes in jest. “I know it.” Corinne got up and poured hot tea into a mug before giving it to Sunshine. “How do you take it?”

“Black is fine.”

“I know it’s fine, but how would you like it?”

“Just sugar, thanks,” Sunshine said.

“Look, Sunshine, you’re a good person. One of the best people I know, probably,” Corinne said as she dumped spoonfuls of sugar into a mug of tea. She handed it to Sunshine. “I mean, shit, you’ve been hanging out with Gil’s family behind his back for how long? Three years now? You’ve maintained something that he wanted to throw in the fucking trash over what? Because his brother hates the gays and loves Trump? Big fucking deal. Our brother isn’t going to change, and Gil just needs to know accept. And one day he will, and he’ll appreciate what you’ve done by keeping the communication lines open. Right now he just can’t see it. Who does that, huh? If the worst thing you’re doing to Gil is hiding the fact that you want his family to be a part of your lives, then I think you’re doing okay, honey.”

“You don’t think I’m just latching on because I never had one of my own?”

“No,” Corinne began, “and even if you are who gives a shit? Everyone needs family. The only people who don’t are fucked up weirdos who like, eat people and shit.” Corinne paused and looked at Sunshine and smiled meekly. She reached out and ran her index finger down Sunshine’s cheek. “I’d rather you be my family than eat people, you know? I mean, if that’s the alternative Gil might even be okay with it.”

Sunshine nodded as Corinne took a sip of her coffee and Sunshine clutched the photograph of her ultrasound in the inner pocket of her jacket, and she gently massaged it with her thumb. She was waffling between going outside and phoning Gil so she could tell him to fuck off and just never let him come back into her life so she could go be alone and prove to him she could be a mother. This moment of bravery waned as she thought about instead telling him that he was right, and she needed to change, and that he was better off as the man he is now than the one he was, and that ultimately she just wanted to be with him. She definitely would not mention the ultrasound, or the movements she felt in her belly from a tiny fetus that couldn't be making discernible movements yet. She placed her hand where she felt the movement and tried to coerce it to move again, but she couldn't. Sunshine was stuck in the gray area between the black and white of her argument with Gil, forever being stuck between a fifty-fifty proposition of telling him what she was going to do. About them. About that. About everything. Sunshine knew that if anyone would understand it would have to be Gil. Even Gil would admit that you can never go too far away when you can't go back home again. Sunshine loved Gil better and more than his own family had from the first time they'd met, but now he wanted to be free of her. He was shedding Sunshine in the same way he'd shed his family and should she really be surprised about that anyway? But she also knew that none of this was really about Gil at all. She was stuck somewhere in between. Not really in between anything, she was just there. Existing. And no matter which door she chose to go through it was for forever.



### Future Islands

Stella came to Jack on Tuesday mornings and nights with her clothing licked by flames. Jack prepared tea for his deceased wife, pouring it slowly into their daughter's tea party playset. Her hair was usually untouched by the blaze, which chose to engulf her torso, torching her dress. After her clothing had flaked to the floor as ash, Jack would trace her naked body with his index finger, pinpointing his favorite places upon her flesh that he missed the most. Jack placed his fingers in the valleys between the notches of her spine, trying to smooth over the skin on her back like a hot tile roofer. Stella tapped her fingers on his jaw, clenching his lips, pulling silky compliments for herself from his mouth. Time fragmented and shot heavenward, splitting Jack's apartment in half as it crept toward the white clouds, and built a barrier around the two as they sat at their daughter's old tea party table. Inside this bubble Jack created, everything halted. It was Jack and Stella and the moon, just barely visible through the crack now present in Jack's ceiling.

But this morning Stella was late, and Jack was getting impatient. He sat gazing at the ceiling, as the blades of his ceiling fan rotated and his memories of Stella tap danced on the synapses of his brain, taunting him, seducing him. He really hated her name, especially now after all these years; he was never able to get mad at her properly without sounding like Marlon Brando. Jack couldn't help but wonder when he'd last dusted anything in his apartment. Maybe Stella wasn't coming because his place was dirty. In college, she'd always been a neat freak, frantically cleaning his apartment when she came

over. At times Jack had wondered if she kept him around so she had something to clean. Something to fix.

Jack got out of bed and threw on the same pair of jeans he'd worn for the past nine days and stumbled to the bathroom to brush his teeth and contemplated shaving his weather-beaten face. The space beneath his eye sockets cratered deeper into his flesh. He smell-tested a white shirt from his bedroom floor and decided it passed for the day. He tucked in his father's dog tags, grabbed his guitar, and carefully placed it into the hollow case. The boiling water whistled in the kitchen as Jack fumbled on his British Knight sneakers. He ran his finger along his dresser and saw his fingertip was gray, wiped it on his shirt, and poured hot water into the pink, princess teacups.

Jack tiptoed around his apartment, preparing for Stella's arrival. He positioned his daughter's old tea party set in the middle of his living room. He placed tea bags in the warm water he had poured into the plastic tea cups. The playset miraculously remained intact despite its years of nonuse during Jack's prison sentence for attempting to murder his brother who had molested Jack and Stella's daughter, Sunshine. Naturally, he bashed his brains in with a baseball bat. Barry Bonds style—peak steroid era Barry Bonds. Each swing was beautiful. Tiny pieces of his brother's skull had flown from his cranium like little birds and fallen neatly into the pink shag carpet of his living room. His brain had fallen slowly out through his mouth, clinging to the bottom row of front teeth, before plummeting to the floor below.

Jack did thirteen years before his incarceration was reversed—something about a new judge thinking the punishment didn't fit the crime. Thirteen years was a long time

for someone with nothing to think about. Now Jack spent his days sucking American Spirits and turning his esophagus into gravel, while also working full-time at the local music shop. His daughter came to visit sometimes, but she didn't say much. Stella had died during childbirth, which left Jack to raise their daughter alone. Jack left his daughter unnamed for several weeks before deciding to name her Sunshine. She couldn't remember what he was like before he went away; she was only three. Jack remembers telling her a story about a rabbit before bed one night, making the shadow along the wall with his fingers dancing in front of the night light. Sunshine had loved shadow puppets as a toddler.

Jack nervously fingered the handle of his tea cup. He noticed how his finger could easily slide through the opening, something it hadn't been able to do since these meet ups began a few months back. In prison, the memories of Stella rarely surfaced. He had missed his daughter more than all the other things in life—music, Stella, his job—but she never came to visit. Jack's father had taken the duty of watching her, and his father hadn't quite forgiven him for spraying his brother's brains across his apartment. Jack ventured his father understood his actions, but couldn't come to terms with verbally agreeing with them. Not yet anyway, maybe on his death bed when he wouldn't have to live much longer with the strained conscience of a man justifying murder, even if the circumstances called for it.

Realizing Stella wasn't coming, Jack dragged his lumbering frame into the kitchen to prepare for work. Jack wasn't a large man before going to prison; he'd resembled something of a gingerbread man. Now Jack looked like he was carved from

white ash wood. Jack knew Stella couldn't possibly recognize the man he had become physically. In college, Jack wore glasses and could barely bench press the bar without any weight put onto the sides of it. Lately Jack gave the impression of someone who could lift a house. But Jack was alone this Tuesday morning for the first time in many Tuesdays, and Jack wept.

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Jack unlocked the store and flipped on the florescent OPEN sign in the front window. The store was built some hundred years ago, when people and their problems were smaller. The rooms were cramped, always musty and smelling of stale sweat. Even the front door had a low height as if built for dwarves. He slid a cigarette from its package and placed it between his dry lips and used his guitar case to prop the front door open while he took a long drag from his cigarette.

"You're letting all the smoke into the store. Jesus Christ, Jack. I've told you a thousand times not to prop the door open while you smoke."

Jack turned to see the part-time employee, Jimmy, walking towards him. He was the owner's pet that took his job way too seriously. Jimmy had the mindset that maybe one day he'd own the place if he set up a living situation deep enough in the owner's rectum.

"I'm going to have to tell Chris when he shows up later this week now," Jimmy said.

Jack sneered and puffed his cigarette before blowing smoke in Jimmy's face, giving him an encore of spit through his teeth that landed at Jimmy's feet.

“Fuck you, Jimbo. I don’t give a shit about whatever you wanna go tell Chris. Chris knows the fuckin’ deal. I’ve known him forever. Who are you, anyway? What’re you eight?”

“Just because I’m only here for the summer break doesn’t mean you’re better than me. Can you even play an instrument? Did you even go to music school?”

Jack watched his spit at Jimmy’s feet slowly bubble, mirroring Jack’s discontent with Jimmy’s existence. Before Jimmy returned for the summer, Jack could brood in the shop alone, put on whatever album he wanted, steer customers towards certain guitars, show them things he would otherwise have to charge for. With Jimmy around he didn’t have that luxury. Jimmy weighed like a tumor on his conscience. Jimmy was the security camera that the owner, Chris, was too cheap to install in the sales floor of the shop.

“Okay, Jimbo. Whatever you say, boss.” Jack spat at his feet again and watched the miniature city of ash forming at the tip of his cigarette before plopping it on top of his two globs of spit.

Jack was normally a reasonable guy at work. But it was Tuesday. Tuesday meant Jack got to meet Sunshine for lunch after she got out of school. Tuesday meant Jack was nervous. Tuesday meant Jack had something to look forward to after work. Tuesday meant Jack got to feel alive. But this Tuesday Stella hadn’t come like she always did, and Jack felt like he was meeting Sunshine alone for the first time since he’d left prison.

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Jack was late getting off for his lunch break, and rushed to their meeting spot a few blocks away. A few paces out he smoothed the front of his shirt, trying to flatten the

day's wrinkles from his appearance. He popped a piece of gum into his mouth and almost combed his thinning hair.

"Kept you waiting, huh?" Jack said.

"Hey, Dad," Sunshine said.

Sunshine's blonde hair reflected off the rays from the sun making her glisten as brightly as Jack's sweating forehead. Her eyes as blue as the ocean at Lighthouse Beach in Cape Cod that the two visited together when she was a toddler.

"Hey, Sunny."

Jack forced an awkward chuckle to ease the tension, but remained a statue. He should have been a pro at this by now.

"Wanna get lunch at the food truck?" Sunshine asked.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

The two ordered street side salads from the food truck and found a nearby bench in the park a few blocks away. A towering sycamore tree shaded the bench, and an oriole perched on the lowest branch eavesdropped on the conversation.

"How's Gil?" Jack asked.

"He's doing really well, all things considered," Sunshine said.

"What's that?" Jack asked.

"His family has problems. I mean like, they make us look normal," Sunshine said.

"But he's doing okay otherwise. He's trying to go to school for journalism. Probably wants to write about baseball, I think. That's usually what he talks about, especially when he's around his step-dad."

“That’s great. That’s really great,” Jack said. Jack didn’t much care for Gil. Jack didn’t care much for anyone that socialized with Sunshine. It wasn’t personal, Jack just hated their existence. They were competitions for Jack’s attention. Jack lived for Sunshine. Jack wanted that reciprocation. Jack wanted to feel love, to feel alive through Sunshine. Lately he felt he had no other choice as Stella visited less frequently, and went back on her word of never missing a Tuesday.

“I have another record for you,” Sunshine said. Sunshine eased the tension since his release from prison by purchasing vinyl records from the local shop and gifting them to Jack during their lunch meets. When Jack was alone at the shop without Jimmy, he would play them, often times masking his tears with a stoic outward appearance in case a customer showed up at the shop. Often times he was asked who he was listening to and Jack had to check the album sleeve to find out before giving an answer. It appeared Sunshine had stellar taste in music even if Jack didn’t always agree, though outsiders often did.

“Oh yeah? Who is it this time?”

“A cool new band I just found with Grandpa. We saw them on Letterman.”

Jack wondered why his father would let Sunshine stay up so late during the week. Watching that garbage, no less. It was one thing to study or to read or even to do anything but watch television. Jack feigned excitement and pretended to not know what the show was anyway.

“That that late night show guy?”

“Yeah. The one that does the list stuff you really like. At least, Grandpa says that’s your favorite part.”

“So they were, like, interviewing? And you thought they were good from that?”

“No, Dad. They performed. Like a concert.”

“A whole concert? No wonder nobody supports music anymore. You can get it on television for free.”

“No, just a song. Like, so you know they’re good and you go buy their stuff.”

Jack knew what she meant. He also knew Sunshine liked to explain things to him as if he’d been transported into 2015 on a time machine from the Jurassic era. He liked to let Sunshine show off and prove his knowledge to her. He enjoyed letting Sunshine believe that he couldn’t function without her. He needed her to have a reason to return.

“Well, I never watched any of that late night shit anyway,” Jack said.

“They were good. He reminded me of Freddie Mercury.”

Jack hated Queen. Stella always loved them. Jack and Stella used to stay up late arguing about music, and Stella always came back to Queen. Jack always liked the cheesy songs, the ones that finished and the listener had a big smile on their face. That made him more of a Beatles fan.

“Well, thanks,” Jack said.

He took the record from her and studied the cover. It was an ocean, the name of the band prominently displayed at the top in embossed white lettering. Beneath, a lady, or at least maybe it was a lady, was wearing a red and white striped sundress, only she didn’t have a head. No hair. No brain. No legs. Just the back of her sundress and her arms



were present. The gold bangle around her arm seemed to suspend in mid-air, never touching her wrist for support. Jack had never seen anything like it. Or, he had, but he had never seen anything like it he enjoyed. He already hated the album.

“Their Letterman performance was the most watched video on the internet when it happened.”

“How can someone know that?” This one actually baffled Jack. He was good at playing dumb, but a website that could track views and when someone watched a video? Felt a little invasive.

“Most places keep track of the views.”

“But how do they know?”

“It’s just a counter, Dad. Don’t worry about it. I promise it’s good,” Sunshine said. Her hair whipped in the wind and she looked truly radiant to Jack.

Jack shuffled his feet and noticed the white ribbon Sunshine wore in her hair.

“Your mother had a ribbon just like that,” Jack said.

Sunshine blushed. “Tell me more about Mom,” She said.

“She had a ribbon just like that. She used to wear it when she danced. It was pretty disgusting. She’d be sweating into it and whatnot. She used to keep it on the hutch by the door, and I’d be fumbling in the dark every morning trying to find my wallet on that damn thing and my hands would come across her sweaty ribbon and I’d have to wash my hands because of it,” Jack said. Jack would give up anything to obtain that smell on his hands now.

“What else? Did you ever see Mom’s dances? Like were you always there?”

Jack curled his finger around his mouth, thinking about the time he'd gotten too drunk with his brother and missed one of Stella's performances. She'd gotten the role of the Sugar Plum Fairy, and she'd reminded Jack to come at least seventeen times the day before. Jack knew he wasn't going to, but he never told her. He'd gone with his brother to a local high school hockey game, smuggling in whiskey and getting drunk while his brother told him he was going to ask his girlfriend to marry him. The same brother Jack would spill the brains of across his living room just a few years later. The thought of this man marrying anyone made Jack uncomfortable, and it made him more uncomfortable to know he had been so naïve and so stupid to let the love of his life around him, alone, to be destroyed.

"Yeah, sure," Jack said.

But when she pressed Jack for details, including the roles she enjoyed the most as a dancer, and the exact map placement of the fucking place they occurred, it was clear that Sunshine wasn't buying his story anymore. This shtick, this belief that Jack had lived for Stella when she was a real entity, a real being, something that was actually worth living for. A person that could reciprocate the process instead of just rotting six feet below the earth taunting Jack with every missed recital, every time he had gotten too drunk to drive her home after, and every time he'd blown off meeting her mother out of fear he'd have to commit earlier than any college kid would've ever wanted to.

Jack tried to steer the conversation back to Sunshine. The normal, oft repeated bullshit people talk about when they don't want to discuss things that actually matter.

How was school? How were her friends? Sunshine, though, had a different agenda on this day. It seemed to Jack, much to his dismay, she wasn't falling for his routine anymore.

"I found a photo of you guys the other day."

Sunshine pulled a photo from her pocket like a card she'd been waiting to play in a poker game for the exact, more precise, most damning moment to her father. Jack saw himself beardless, his glasses hanging low on his nose, reading a book. In the background, Stella stood with her feet in first position, her arms raised in the air in the shape of parentheses, a smile embroidered on her face like an old doll, and she looked over at Jack.

"Where the hell did you get that?"

"Grandpa gave it to me."

"Give it to me," Jack demanded.

Sunshine handed over the photo and Jack tore it in half. Then he tore it in half again and again until it was little fragments blowing in the breeze like tiny snowflakes that couldn't be recovered. He glared at Sunshine, spit on the ground between the two of them, and rose from the bench to walk home, knocking his lunch onto the ground. He screamed at Sunshine, and Sunshine put her face in her hands as he yelled. Spit flew from his mouth. He arms flailed, and Sunshine put up her hands as if she was preparing for a beating as if Jack would somehow fathom beginning to strike his child eighteen years into her life.

For weeks, Jack and Sunshine had been fine. Pleasant conversations. Moments like today were the ones Jack had spent months trying to prevent. The ones where he was

a raging lunatic yelling at a helpless girl on a public sidewalk. At this point it had almost become routine. Nobody stopped to ask what was wrong anymore. Sunshine no longer cried. She simply looked at him, defeated and sad, while she resumed her position on the bench.

Jack grabbed the album Sunshine had brought him and walked home. Behind him, he knew without looking that Sunshine was on her hands and knees cleaning up the mess of lettuce and tomatoes he had used to decorate the sidewalk. And the fragments of the picture, forever lost, blowing somewhere nearby. Some of them stuck to the juices of the tomato, forever ruined.

“I bet you were there more than you think,” Sunshine yelled after him.

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Jack threw open the front door and quietly sat his guitar case on the couch. He placed a cigarette carefully in his mouth and grabbed a bottle of vodka from above the refrigerator. He stole three ice cubes from the ice tray and placed them neatly in his glass and watched the clear liquid wash over the ice cubes. People hiked to see shittier waterfalls than this. Without even removing the cigarette from his mouth Jack downed the glass. The taste of the two entities mixed together to give Jack the taste of an ash tray. Two glasses. Then three. He downed the glasses awaiting for Stella's arrival. She never showed that morning, and she was already late tonight. Stella always came before and after he met Sunshine. It was their routine. Why was Stella breaking routine, Jack thought. Sweaty and dumbfounded, Jack sat at the table of his apartment, loud music

blasting in the background of his apartment, and Stella appeared, joining him for tea. She sat silently dipping a tea bag into a tiny kid's teacup.

And Stella looked beautiful. Her blonde hair exploded off her scalp, growing incessantly in a race to see which lock could get the longest before Jack's journey was up. A tortoise shell necklace lay between her breasts, conveniently eyeing him from her striped sundress. She peered at Jack over her drink, one eyebrow cocked, and her eyes like two tiny ice cubes. Beneath the table her feet moved unobstructed in her old pointe shoes.

"If life could be only one moment, what would it be?" Stella asked Jack.

When Sunshine was nearly two, Jack had taken her to the beach—just the two of them. He'd propped her up on the beach by making a little sand mound for her to lean back on. She'd laughed—a big, open-mouthed laugh—and given all her attention to Jack as he laboriously built a sand castle for her to marvel at. He had made multiple trips to the ocean, making the sand wetter, denser, thicker. He'd packed it into the plastic molds he'd bought last minute from the beach souvenir store, and shown Sunshine how to flip it, giving it two taps on the outside with your shovel for good luck, and carefully removing the mold to reveal an imperfect castle. Jack felt intense love for Sunshine when she wasn't around complicating his emotions with her presence.

Stella's expression sunk and her eyes pierced Jack. He'd become immune to that gaze—even before she'd died.

"Do you remember the moment you left me? The day I died, do you remember it?" Stella asked.

“I remember,” Jack said.

They’d wheeled her off into the nursery. Stella was caked in sweat. Stella’s room in the hospital looked like the inside of a computer; she had so many wires and IVs attaching her to machines. The doctor told him that they’d lost her during the birth. Jack had pleaded for them to try to bring her back again, and spit had flown from his mouth, hanging from his lips like a rabid dog; the doctors told him they’d done all they could for her. The machines gasped. They removed Jack from the room—it was hardly a room at all, just a curtain on a fucking rod—and Jack watched as the shadows behind the sheet moved frantically around trying to bring Stella back to life. Shadow puppets. Even then, he knew she was gone. *Let’s try one more time*, Jack heard Dr. Pisgah say calmly. Jack heard the sound of static and a loud thump as a defibrillator sent a rush of energy into Stella’s heart. Another thump. A loud silence crept through the room, chilling the inhabitants. *Time of death, 10:37pm*, Dr. Pisgah said. He said it like he was ordering a pizza on a Tuesday night. Then more silence. Jack boiled inside, slowly roasting his organs and turning his flesh to tin. A nurse tried one last ditch effort by as they brought Sunshine back into the room. They placed her gently over Stella’s chest. Jack wondered what the hell they were doing. Skin to skin contact has been known to revive mothers during childbirth, a nurse explained to him. But Sunshine wasn’t special, and Stella didn’t respond. Nobody could save his wife that Tuesday night. Jack left the hospital the next day with only fragments of Stella intricately placed within Sunshine that Jack couldn’t find.

Stella was naked now, her sundress slowly burning under the bright sun attached to Jack's living room ceiling fan. Her skin smooth like ice cream. The flames from her sundress melted her skin, letting it drip slowly the wax from a candle. He reached out to touch her and watched as he made indentations in her perfect flesh. He scraped at it, picked at it, and destroyed it. He relaxed the back of his fingers against her cheek, caressing it slightly, and watched as a smile formed on her face. Her eyes slowly melted under the sun like ice cubes on an August afternoon. Jack continued picking her face like a scab to get her creamy flesh beneath his nails and over his palms and stuck between his fingers.

"You left me, Jack."

"I know. I'm so sorry, baby."

"I need you to save me," Stella said.

"I don't know how."

"My dear Jack, you know how. You always have."

But Jack didn't know. He'd been in the same routine for years, and nothing worked. Jack determined that the only way to save Stella—to save himself—was to rescue her from herself. It was the only reason why she came to visit him night after night. She came, Jack did nothing, and she died. Every night she perished again in front of him because Jack was weak. He needed to merge their beings, to repair his own, to be one with her. Once they were one there would be no more missing her, no more what if's, no more tears. There would be dancing; there would be music; there would be jokes; there would be arguments; there would be a family together at last. As one unit. Jack

wanted to watch something, anything, change. To change by his hand. To go hand in hand, skin to skin, into the moonlight—something easier to see than to feel. He wished to escape this prospect of hell he'd created in his living room, these awkward tea parties to perish, to create anew with Sunshine, and Stella—of course—always with Stella. He needed to be in a room that was planet-sized and clean with Stella; not here with all these flames where all he breathed was smoke. Jack began applying Stella's melting wax skin to his own, real, fleshy skin. Rubbing it in harder, deeper, everywhere. He held her decaying face in both of his hands and forced his lips hard into hers, sending a shockwave of energy into his body. It had been a long time since they kissed and they'd been out of practice. Their teeth clinked together, and he accidentally bit her tongue, but she didn't seem to notice. He felt the flames conquer his feet as he caressed her face, though everything was becoming lighter. She was disappearing, blowing away from him. He stopped feeling his teeth on her tongue only to continue carving into her skin, mashing it up and rolling it onto his palms so that he could blend it with his own.

Jack picked up the album and studied the cover, watching the faceless woman stand underneath the sunlight. He outlined her body with his fingertips, wondering if he pressed hard enough if she could feel it. He removed the record from the album sleeve and placed it on his turn table before delicately dropping the needle onto its outer edge. He'd listened to Sunshine's music before at work, but never at home, privately, where he could truly listen to it the way he had when Stella gave him music recommendations when they were younger.



Music filled the small room, stretching the walls with it, warping the apartment into wild shapes. Jack let out a volcanic eruption of laughter, letting the lava of laughs envelop him, overwhelming him like an undertow on a wavy beach. The singer sang like a bird sang—not like a parrot, or some oversized peacock—but like a nightingale would sing. Gallant and trilling, his voice slunk through the room to pluck all Jack’s strings, and bend all the notes into perfect shapes before they entered Jack’s ear. The type of music one can enjoy without truly understanding it. The voice was perfect, just singing down on Jack, pelting him with disjointed lyrics and the range of a voice he’d never heard before. His voice filled the entire room, leaving no space for Jack to feel alone, to feel scared, to feel incomplete.

## Kings

I lived a life that people make movies out of. At least, the type of movie I would make. Black and white. Sporadic flurries of color where it mattered. I wanted to make movies the first time I ever saw one on Mom's television. It wasn't a fancy thing, just one with a dial and a screen. Remote never worked because Cass stole the batteries for his remote control car the Christmas before. I used to find myself sitting in my bed at night, my hands extended from my face creating the shape of a square, like the lens of a camera, and I'd move them around in the dark of my room, pretending to shoot films. Any kind of films, really. Dinosaurs, gangsters, drugs, women, you name it. I had the eye, I told myself. I could scream "cut" anytime I wanted and life would screech to a halt. My film would stand still. I could rearrange the characters. Rearrange the props. Tear down the set. Make people recite lines like puppets. That's what a director does. That's what I wanted to do. That was the dream. To get off Poplar Street and show the world where I came from, that I made it out alive.

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There was this house in the town. Old boarded-up thing. The entire house got swallowed by gray over a decade ago. Before the house became the house it is today, it was owned by this white guy. The whole town was pretty white, at least more than it is today. It was about half white, and half black. A real mulatto town. The gray house still stands because nobody wants to own it. Nobody will really touch it, honestly. All the land around it either got bought a long time ago and the properties destroyed, either by the resident's mistreatment or the government condemning broken buildings, or there was never

anything in parts of the town to begin with. It's just a gray house sitting in the middle of a big ass field. There's no trees or nothing to make it look spooky in the daylight; it's just a house.

When I was nine, my two friends and I went to the house at the end of Poplar Street. We called it Poplar Street, but nobody really knows what the street is called anymore. Half the letters faded off the sign decades ago, and it could've been anything, but Poplar sounded good, sounded strong. In the dark, it looked like something from a children's book. The front door was jet black, and a disheveled walkway led from it to the edge of the street. The two windows up top were symmetrical, except that one didn't have a pane in it—it was cracked when a kid named Julian accidentally hit a baseball through it in the summer of '94. From the street, the house resembled a face, the two windows were the only way to see into its soul. Nobody ever walked into that house and came out the same. It was impossible to enter and not come out altered—my cousin Bumbo told me that, and he would know because he had been inside. He never came out as Bumbo, and he sure as shit didn't come out of it because he wanted to. The house spit him out. He spent three days inside, and he came out chewed up—I've seen the bite marks on his arms—and he isn't Bumbo anymore.

We were nine-years-old, and we were standing there—me, Cass, and Comb—when we were only nine, and this was the closest I'd ever been to the house. Cass claims he peeked in the door once when it was left open, but I know he was just talking. I remember the sky that night. It wasn't a typical night on Poplar Street. The sky was purple, sort of like Bumbo, and it kept flickering like a light bulb doing its best to burn

out and finally die. There weren't any stars and it felt like the sky was a blanket. There may have been a moon, I don't remember, but if there was I'm sure it was as wide as our gaping mouths.

"I already been inside," Cass said. "One of y'all go first."

"Bull shit," Comb said.

"You ain't never been in there anyway," I said. "Who the hell you think you foolin'?"

"I sure have, Bird," Cass said.

Bird was what they called me. I never really understood how I got that nickname.

"We'll all go together," Comb said creeping forward and looking back at us for reassurance. "Come on, let's go."

We shuffled forward a few steps and the house began to loom. It was blending with the purple sky, and the creaking from inside was audible now. We got to the front door and Comb turned toward me, his huge bug eyes motioning towards the door knob.

"Go on, turn it, Cass," Comb said. "You the expert-already-been-here-ass-type-of-dude. Show us how you did it the first time."

Cass reached out for the knob confidently and attempted to turn it. The knob didn't budge. "It's stuck," he said. "I think I can jiggle it and it'll—"

Cass never finished the sentence. The sky flickered and Comb shouted out that he saw a face in the upper window and we ran. We ran down the crumbled walkway, strode over the cold lawn, our bodies colliding with each other. Cass wasn't wearing shoes that day, as he did often, and he looked like his entire body was skating across the front lawn

of the abandoned house. He moved elegantly for someone running in fear. Comb was holding Cass's hand, being dragged across the yard. As they passed me they knocked me over, and they kept running, presumably to our meet-up spot.

As I tumbled to the ground, my head hit the curb. We were clear of the abandoned house by a few hundred feet at that point. I can't even imagine what would've happened if I'd fallen in the front lawn of that place. I can only assume I would've been swallowed up as if the lawn was made of ice, only to never be able to find the hole I made in the first place, leaving myself to drown beneath the ground in very dramatic fashion like some old black and white film. My head bled from the impact and I shook my eyes open and in the distance I could no longer see Cass and Comb running, but I did see a group of kids older than us underneath a streetlight at the corner. One of their group was walking towards me, a cigarette hanging off her fingertips, and she was saying something to me, but I wasn't sure what it was.

And that was the first time I met Sasha.

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Every summer since I finished sixth grade I ran drugs for Cass's older brother. There wasn't much actual running involved in the beginning. Mom needed the money so we could eat without worrying. Nobody in town was hiring someone my age, and I kind of liked it—the work, that is. I enjoyed the crisp air, sitting around on overturned milk crates just hanging out with my friends. We all did it. Cass, Comb, and myself. There were other dudes out there with us—like Freakshow—but for the most part it was just us three hanging out.

I was never a drug dealer. I wasn't wearing a do-rag, a black tank top, standing with my hands behind me back and my feet parted, just waiting for someone to walk up so I could peddle my product. The thing about selling drugs that nobody ever talks about is that the drug dealer doesn't need to say a damn word to his customers. It isn't like selling hairspray at the market, or some jabroni walking door to door selling encyclopedias. When he shows up at his customer's door, he lets them asks questions and he answers them. I ain't never answered a single fucking question regarding the shit we hand over to our customers, because people who buy drugs know what the fuck they do. The day a fiend walks up to our corner scratching his neck and picking a fleck of skin off the temple of his skull, looks at me and says, *Hey, man, what that white powder do?*, I'd retire at the ripe age of twelve.

After our first week out there on the corner, Cass and I both had enough money for a Nintendo64, so we left that at my house, and we'd play it after sitting in the sun all day. Mom couldn't afford the electric bill of us playing it all night, but my neighbor, Mr. Heinz, like the ketchup, he let us run an extension cord into his living room to borrow his power in exchange for a discount on the weed we sold. Comb would come over, too, and we didn't have many games for three players, but we made it work.

My first day ever running, Cass's older brother gave us a bunch of medicine vials. Not the orange ones that you see in movies, but really small things, like one's that usually have an eye dropper for a cap. They were filled with white powder mostly, but some of them were different.

“This is called “WMD”,” he said giving us a quart-sized plastic bag filled with them. “Anyone in our group asks for the product when they need a re-up, that’s what you give them.”

“Why it called that?” I asked.

“It’s just a name, man. People like stupid names,” he said.

“So next week we gon’ have different product with a different name?” Comb asked.

“Nah, man. Not like that,” Cass’s brother said. “Same product, different name.”

“Ain’t that lying?” Cass said.

“We selling drugs, Cass,” his brother said. “We ain’t running for president.”

His brother walked away and Comb slapped the back of Cass’s head with his open palm. He mocked him by saying *Ain’t that lying*, and it became the theme for the rest of the summer. Any time Cass had an original thought, we would grin with our crooked teeth and ask him, *Ain’t that lying?*

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When I was seven, about ten years ago, Cass’s older brother told us the story behind the house. Or at least, the ghost story behind it. This was way back before we ever even came up with the plan to try and go inside in grade five. Cass told me the old owner, the white guy, used to kidnap kids and torture them. Eat them, even. The cops finally raided the house one day because some sorry motherfucker thought it was a good idea to be a hero. Take on the white cannibal himself. He was met with a baseball bat to the dome, his brain splaying across the walls of the house like a painting. He’d told his wife where he was

going and she started to get worried because he ain't come back yet. But how could he? He didn't have a brain anymore. He didn't have legs anymore either, on account of the cannibal. Cass said that cannibals always start at the feet. We don't know why, it's just what they do. Anyway, the cops raided the house after the hero's wife called. They didn't even bother knocking like they do in the movies, and ask if the guy wants to come out quietly. They just knocked the door down with that massive steel hammer they use in the movies, and they ran in with their assault rifles. Cass said he remembers flashes from the windows, but he wasn't there. I don't care what he says. We were both in first grade when that shit went down. Cass always tells it like he played sick that day, like he knew the cannibal was going to get taken down, but that's just talk. Cass is like that. All about tough talk, but ain't about shit. Kitten soft, but he talking like he's a modern day Scarface. When they finally got the guy he didn't put up a struggle. They found him with brains smeared across his work shirt. They put him in handcuffs, and he went to the cop car on his own volition. Can you believe that? A guy who has been eating people just gives up that easily? The rumor is that his refrigerator was more or less like anyone else's. Yeah, he had human meat in jars and shit, but he was just like us. He had more condiments than anything.

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The other thing about selling our product is that we don't have a responsibility to anyone or anything. I have never forced someone to buy something they didn't want. We go through four to six bags of product every day. I don't need to push them. My mom was skeptical about the work I would be doing, but Cass's brother broke it down for her the



first time he asked me to help out by telling me exactly what he told her. Fiends can buy the shit from us, or they can walk two streets over and get the exact same thing from someone else. It might as well be us they give the money to.

The second summer I was running drugs, Sasha started coming around. Needed product for her mother, she always told us. Sasha was in high school then, a few grades up from us, and she was starting to look really good. Ever since that night I smashed my face on the curb she always smiled at me and did that movie star wave. The kind of wave where she twinkles the tips of her fingers and raises her eyebrows just a little bit. Just enough to let me know she knows I see her.

One day over that summer Cass's brother was lecturing us about the drugs. The first summer we helped out, all he had us do was hold it underneath our crates, and whenever someone came up and asked, we'd point them down the street to Freakshow. Freakshow would then handle the rest of the deal. But, this summer we'd been promoted to Freakshow's duties, and some boys younger than us did our old job.

I fucked up on my first day.

"The fuck is wrong with you, Bird?" Cass's brother said.

"I didn't know, man," I said. "All I know, is you told me to give him the product whenever the kids 'round the way sent him down here. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to take his money, too."

"Listen, Bird. You only give the product," he said. "You give the shit and take the money then anybody watching just seen the entire exchange."

"Who watching?" Cass asked.

“Ain’t nobody watching,” his brother yelled.

“Then why you say that?”

“Just in case they are,” his brother said. “Goddamn, listen. Ain’t nobody watching us, but just in case some fuckin’ white knight decides to stroll through we don’t need him seeing the entire exchange. It really ain’t that hard. You give him the product, he walks back toward Freakshow, and he pay somebody on the way. You ain’t need to worry about it, okay? The less you guys know the better.”

“Yes, sir,” we all said in unison. Sometimes it was easier to tell Cass’s brother what he wanted to hear than to argue. Eventually he’d leave and we could do it our way without him looking over our shoulders the whole time.

“A’ight, look, just do y’all damn jobs and don’t worry. The more relaxed you are the better this’ll be so don’t worry about anything, but giving people what they ask for.”

“Yes, sir.”

As he was leaving I saw Sasha across the street leaning on the Poplar Street sign. Her stomach was hanging out. Or, I guess more accurately her shirt wasn’t long enough to cover her stomach. It was this black half-shirt thing, and her stomach glistened. It was sort of like a commercial, when the actress’ sweat shines, and everyone and their grandma knows that sweat smells like trash, but still fantasize about licking it off their body anyway. She had on tight green jeans, and she was smoking a cigarette. That had kind of become her calling card by now. I don’t know if I’d ever seen her without something in her mouth.

“What’s up, boys?” she said from across the street. She put the cigarette out and hop stepped across the black pavement with her bare feet. “Damn, that shit is hot,” she said.

“Yeah, where your shoes at?” Cass said.

“I don’t know. Couldn’t find ‘em. That’s why I been standing in the grass all day.”

“I hear you,” Cass said. “What you need today?”

“Cola,” she said. “For my mom.”

“Anything else?” Cass said.

“The usual.”

“Here you go,” I said reaching out slowly after grabbing the drugs from beneath my crate. “Two vials of rock, and two grams of green.”

She accepted them and nodded. “Thanks, B,” she said. “I’ll be seeing you around, I think.” And then she was gone, off towards Freakshow.

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I was probably eight years old the first time I saw a fiend try to light a rock off a stove. It was my cousin, Bumbo. Bumbo was born my cousin, but our circumstances turned us into brothers. He was six years older than me, but we shared a bedroom because the house wasn’t that big. Bumbo had a really frizzy, nappy beard. My family always grew beards early. He probably hadn’t showered in a few days, so his beard was practically just straw at that point. His beard caught fire just as the glass did, and he went up in flames. His beard, I mean. And his hair. Half of his face nowadays can’t grow hair. It

doesn't really look burned, but there's no life underneath that skin on that half of his face. I'm not entirely sure he has life inside him anywhere else, anyway. I still see Bumbo around town. He doesn't come around the fish fries and cookouts anymore. It's not like he isn't welcome. I mean, shit, we'd probably still welcome my father back at this point. It's been nearly eleven years now since he left. Mom used to ask me if I missed my father and I suck my teeth, shake my head, and continue doing whatever I was doing. Honestly, I miss that nigga more now than I did then. Every chance I got to say I missed him as a kid I would swallow it, let it build up inside me like a thousand little birds aching to be released. When I was little I swear to God you could put your ear to my mouth and you'd hear the birds chirping. I suppressed it for so long the birds died inside of me and there they lay, broken, and unaccounted for. I try now to get them out, but the words are hollow like the bullets inside Cass's pistol. Saying it now doesn't accomplish anything. It's just a vanity thing, really. Being fatherless became a part of me, just something to identify with on the playground with all the other kids who ain't got fathers. It was mostly just us blacks, but this one girl, she didn't have either of her parents, and that really sucked for her. I need my mom. She said she never even met hers, but I don't know how that can be when she has to pass through her entire body to get into this existence. Even if she never talked to her, or met her, she still knew her. She was her house, protecting her while she was inside. That girl moved away awhile back. I don't even remember her name, but I'll never forget the girl with no parents.

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By eighth grade, me and Sasha were sort of an item. She was a few grades above me, but that didn't matter so much. We'd known each other for a while, and everyone in town was basically family anyway, so age didn't really seem to be a factor for most stuff. My mom didn't like Sasha. Thought she was a bad influence. She said Bumbo and Sasha run in the same circles, and that can only mean trouble. She still lets Bumbo come around though, so it can't be all bad.

I always hated gym class in school. I wasn't much for running—ever since I just had to run on account of my summer job—and sweating wasn't high up on my list neither. Comb and I used to skip since we had the same period, and sometimes we would smoke cigarettes up in the senior parking lot. I always loved that we had a parking lot at that school. It wasn't like anyone was driving to that school anyway. Everyone in town walked. There was a tree growing right in the middle of the parking lot, and that's where we would go when we skipped. Just hang around the tree like caterpillars. Usually Cass would come with us, too, but this time he had a test in his science class, and his mom was gonna beat his ass if she got any more letters home saying he wasn't where he was supposed to be, so he didn't come with us.

“So what you think life like outside of here?” Comb asked.

“Of where?” I said. “School?”

“Nah, man. Like, outside of Poplar Street.”

“I don't know, man,” I said. “I remember when I was little, my mom used to tell me that my dad was in a big city. And that one day we'd meet up with him. And there was hot dogs and ice cream stands on every corner.”

“Shit, man,” he said. “It’d be mad fucking dope to get hot dogs while we skipped.”

“No doubt,” I said. I took a drag from my cigarette. There was airplane in the sky. It was writing words with the dust coming out the back. I’d never seen an airplane do that before, but I’d read about them at school. “What that say?” I said pointing up to the airplane.

“Sun’s in the way,” he said.

“Yeah, it is,” I said. “Why you wanna leave? What you wanna do anyway?”

“Me? Shit, make money, man,” he said. “Any way I can, bruv.”

“Money ain’t everything, though.”

“Sure it is. Why the fuck else we work for Cass’s brother every summer?”

“Yeah, but like, it’s more than just the money. Yeah, it helps. Especially for mom. She ain’t gotta do fifteen braids a day now just for the grocery. But how many people we gotten to know? Me and Sasha wouldn’t be shit if I hadn’t started that.”

“I guess. When you put it like that. But it’s still like, almost entirely for the money,” Comb said laughing.

“Maybe,” I said. “And what when you got the money? What then?”

“Whatchu mean, bruv?”

“I mean, shit,” I said. “You just a nigga like everybody else. You grew up by the same rules that I did. Right here. On Poplar Street. What money gonna change?”

“Shit, then I can be Mr. Nigga,” he said and we both laughed. “What you wanna do if you get out?”

“If?” I said. “Oh, I’m getting out. Just a matter of when.”

“Well, whatever. And what then?”

“I’m gonna make movies, man,” I said. “Me and my mom, and sometimes Mr. Heinz if he feeling lonely, we watch these old black and white movies on the tv. They all just so bad ass, man. Just to have such command, and so much power. And to be able to make something so beautiful that everyone is gonna love. That’s that shit, man.”

“Too deep for me, bruv,” Comb said. And then we laughed again.

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My third summer for Cass’s brother, the drug scene was slow. We did business, just not like we used to do. Cass got put on special duty, mostly because his brother was higher up, and Comb and I were left by ourselves. I used to run over to Sasha’s after work, but while I was at work I used to imagine she was the star of my own movie. That I was the director. I think even in 2007, people would be cool with a black and white film. It’s classy, and color was never really my thing. Sasha would look fantastic in black and white, maybe a little red only on her lipstick because she always wore lipstick and that needed to be known by my audience, otherwise it’d just look like she had some dark glossy lips for some weird reason. She was star material, and I was the one who could capture it one day. But these were just the thoughts I had on my milk crate at work.

After work, I was wearing my backpack and striding up to Sasha’s house. I got on the porch and rapped slowly on the side window and waited for the door to open.

“Bird, how good to see you,” Sasha’s mom said. She was rolling around in her wheelchair. She isn’t even crippled. Not even a little bit. Furniture is just the last thing on

people's minds in this town, so we take it how we can get it. A few years back the hospital closed down and most of the supplies were sold or donated to the local thrift shop. Now everyone in town had a decent mobile chair in their house, a pair of crutches, enough gauze to stop a damn flood, but if we ever got hurt we had to go to the next town over to get a doctor.

"Ma'am," I said nodding downward and handing over a brown paper bag filled with her weekly product allotment. "You mind if I come in and see Sasha for a bit?"

"Your momma gon' kill you, boy, but go ahead," she said. Mom thought Sasha was a bad influence. She didn't exactly like that we were a thing. Sasha's mom moved out of the way and let me enter the house. I watched her roll away on the chair into her bedroom. It's really strange watching someone pump their arms so hard to get a wheelchair to move over carpet when they can just stand up and exert half the effort.

I walked down the hall and went into the bedroom opposite the one Sasha's mom entered. Sasha was laying in her bed—no bed frame, just a mattress—writing something in a notebook.

"Hey," I said from the doorframe.

"Jesus, boy, who you sneaking up on?" she said. She slid the notebook underneath her nightstand and turned back to me smiling.

"You, I guess," I said.

"Well, don't keep me waiting, get over here," she said.



I moved onto the bed and kissed Sasha. I liked to pretend that every time we kissed more freckles appeared on her face to dot her cinnamon skin like little pieces of chocolate, but I knew that was stupid.

“What you bringing me today?” she asked between kisses.

“Cass called it Tums.”

“Tums?”

“Yeah. Tums”

“Like the diarrhea medicine?”

“Like the diarrhea medicine.”

“Why the fuck does he call it that?”

“He said the first time he smoked it, he got so high he almost shit himself,” I said.

“He’s an idiot, I swear,” Sasha said. “I don’t know why you spend all your time with that boy.”

“I got to, you know that.”

“What do you mean?” Sasha said walking around the room now. She was looking for her bong, Big Blue. Real tall thing. For something so slender and so tall, she lost it an awful lot. You’d think she would keep something so important to her in a proper place.

“I mean, I got to hang out with him,” I said. “That’s just how it is. He’s family.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said brushing the conversation into the closet. She’d turned against Cass recently. No real explanation, it was like she was paranoid he was going to get me killed one day or something.

Sasha found the bong and I gave her the baggie from my pocket. She pulled the grinder from her nightstand. She opened the grinder and sprinkled the weed in, closing the grinder on top of it. She turned it a few times. It was a sensual experience for me every time she did this. She'd look me in the eye, bite her lower lip, and grind the weed. It wasn't on purpose. Maybe it was the anticipation of knowing what was about to come that got my blood pumping.

"You off for the day, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I always come here last," I said. "Be a waste not to."

"I'll be right back," Sasha said leaving the room.

I fought the urge to read her notebook that she'd thrown under her nightstand. I decided not to. Just being here was enough for me. A few summers ago I felt like I was living for the moments where I saw Sasha on the street, cigarette hanging from her fingertips, winking at me in my fantasies. Now it was real. It was something I could reach out and touch—her face, her bed, her bong, her tongue—they felt like they were mine.

"Bird, I swear to God if I shit myself you ain't never coming back," she said laughing as she passed me the bong after she took a hit for herself.

We sat like this idly for a few moments, passing it back and forth, getting our high.

"I can't feel my face," I said. "Fucking Jesus, no wonder Cass shit himself."

"You said he almost shit himself."

"Same fucking thing, fuck, god."

“Come here, Bird,” she said. “Relax, and don’t let the high go to waste.” She slipped her arm underneath both straps of her shirt, pulling it down to her stomach. She grabbed the back of my neck and brought my face to her breasts.

“Goddamn it, what the hell I tell y’all about smoking in my house,” someone yelled from outside the bedroom.

“Oh, shit,” Sasha said pulling her shirt back up as the door swung open.

“You two, Jesus Christ our Lord,” Sasha’s mom said. She was standing. “Just go outside, it can’t be that hard.” And then she left.

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The gray house is where the fiends hang out now. The property nobody ever wants to touch. They pile in there like Dr. Seuss characters. It doesn’t look real. It’s like when you watch a movie and they show the outside of the house, then they show in the inside, and it can’t possibly be the same house. That’s what it’s like watching the fiends pile in. You see fifty go in and you just wonder how the hell they all fit inside so neatly with enough room to shoot up and smoke and do whatever else the hell fiends do when they get high. Whenever Bumbo used to get high he’d just fall into a chair. He didn’t sit, he’d just sort of lay in it. Half in and half out. He looked like someone just shot him with a shotgun at point blank range and he’d been lifted off the ground and flown backwards to land perfectly in the red chair in our living room. That’s where he used to shoot up. He’d tie off his arm with a t-shirt scrap, and he’d flick the needle a few times. After he shot himself up, he’d make this face like he was about to ejaculate all over the living room, except he’d be motionless. His limbs would shake a little bit, and his eyelids would get

real heavy, but he'd keep them open. It looked like his eyelids were a half closed shutter door on a storage unit. You could see the bottom of the whites of his eyes, and they'd loll around in his sockets while a tiny bit of drool fell out of his mouth, which always got caught in what was left of his beard hairs on his chin. Now, Bumbo just shoots up at the gray cannibal house with fifty other guys that look just like him. I remember when Bumbo used to look like me instead.

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We moved outside that night Sasha's mom yelled at us. We didn't bring the bong with us, we weren't dumb. I rolled a blunt on the hood of her mom's car—the one that only had three wheels—and as I licked the paper Sasha was staring up at the moon. It's always a weird feeling when you go inside a place that isn't your own home when the sun is out, and you come outside later and it's dark. Not like the pitch black dark, but the dark where the moon is a floodlight in a sea of a midnight purple sky. Everything felt radiant and perfect in that moment. Especially, Sasha.

“What you thinkin' 'bout?” I asked.

“Nothing, really. The sky just looks nice.”

“It does.” I offered her the blunt and she took it, placed it between her lips, and lit it with a match from her pocket. She exhaled and held the blunt between her middle and ring finger like that white lady from the old films, Marilyn Monroe. The one who was always standing over vents in the street and getting her dress blown up and acting like she was surprised when it happened. These were the things Sasha did that I always loved. She

didn't even know she was doing it, holding the blunt like that just looking classic and pretty. Or maybe she did know, but she knew how to make everything seem effortless.

"So," I began, "what you gon' do when you graduate next year?"

"Might not even go back," Sasha said.

"What? Why? You so close. Only got one more year."

"What's the point? I ain't going nowhere. Look at us, Bird. I mean, shit, you're a fuckin' drug runner. I'm just one of your buyers. Or really, my mom is. What the fuck the world supposed to do with us?"

"That don't mean nothing," I said. "This is just one part. You finish your year and you're done. You can fuckin' leave this place. Get out, you know? You can do anything. That's what Mr. Freamon always said. Graduate, and do whatever we want."

"Mr. Freamon full of shit. His Uncle Tom ass didn't go through what we went through. He had a father. His mom wasn't buying coke from her daughter's boyfriend."

"I'm your boyfriend now?"

"For tonight, yeah," Sasha said taking another hit off the blunt, offering it back to me.

I flashed my smile at her and took the blunt, hoisting myself up onto the hood of the car. I laid back against the windshield and exhaled so the smoke blurred my vision of the moon.

"Come up here, girl," I said reaching my arm out and letting her climb up it.

"Gimme that blunt, boy," Sasha said grabbing it out of my mouth.

"As your boyfriend I gotta ask you something," I said.

“A’ight, I’m revoking your privilege already.”

“For real though, will you go back for me?”

“Back to what?”

“What we were just saying. Back to school. If you ain’t gon’ do it for you, do it for me.”

“I’ll think about it,” Sasha said waving off the question.

We laid there for a good while not really saying much of anything. We weren’t touching each other, just lying next to each other and feeling our bodies heat up. The gaze of the moon focused on us in some supernatural way. Like it was choosing us. Like we were on stage. On a movie set. Directing my own film, and we’re both the stars of it. I’d zoom in real close to examine the flaws on my skin, show the imperfections in the curves of her hips, and pan out slowly. Her red lips would be the first thing of color in the whole film. Right now, the crescendo effect drawing out the oohs and the ahhs from my audience. The darkness surrounded the car, but we were lit up like fireflies, buzzing in our existence, just drifting around. These were the times my characters cherished the most, where the present felt like enough, even if I, my character in this scene, was constantly pressuring her into the future. Sure, three years we’d be okay, but right now we’re okay, too. This was happiness for me: laying on a windshield with Sasha crafting the perfect movie scene.

“Where you think we gonna go, huh?”

“What you mean?” I asked.

“You want me to graduate, and then you’ll graduate in three years when you’re done. But where we gonna go?”

“We can go wherever,” I said. “My mom always said we was kings. She’d wake me up in the morning, me and Bumbo, you know ‘cause we had to share the same mattress growing up, and she’d always tell us, ‘Kings ain’t wait for the day to come to them.’”

“The fuck that mean?”

“You gotta seize what you got when it’s in front of you, you know? You can’t just drift along and hope it works out.”

“Yeah,” Sasha said.

We prolonged the night by staying silent again. This time I reached my hand over and felt for Sasha’s wrist. It was cold. Her wrist was wet with sweat and I must’ve been tuning it out, but her teeth were chattering a bit. It was almost ninety degrees out and she was cold.

“Damn, Sasha, what the fuck? You want my shirt?” I removed my shirt and she put it on, laying back down on the windshield and putting her head onto my bare chest. She ran her fingers over my stomach and rapped her fingers rhythmically over the lining of my boxers.

“Bird?” she asked.

“Yeah?”

“What you want to be when you grow up?”

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to grab Sasha by her cold wrists and take her somewhere warm. Somewhere safe. Show her life would be okay. That life existed outside of this fucking street named after a goddamned tree. That Mr. Freamon was right. That we ain't have fathers, but we got each other, and that having each other is like a king having his queen, and having a king and a queen is all you need to make the dream become a reality. But I couldn't because Sasha didn't understand. Didn't understand why school was important, and that money wasn't all it was cracked up to be. That the money would always be there, but life always wouldn't. And I couldn't tell her that because that's not how this scene goes, and in my own little Hollywood, in Poplarwood, the scene has to be dramatic, and reality ain't fucking dramatic enough for the film I'm directing.

"Alive," I said.

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"Cigarettes? Really, guys?" Mr. Freamon said. He'd caught Comb and me smoking outside during gym class again. He usually rolled up on us, but the cigarettes were already put out. This time, though, he caught Comb mid-puff, and he was disgusted. "You guys are better than that."

"How long we gotta stay for?" Comb asked.

"As long as I say."

"We gotta do anything, or just sit here?"

"You're gonna listen to me," he said.

The thing about Mr. Freamon is that he thought really highly of himself. And everyone knew. He wore bowties to school every day. And he was just a history teacher.



He was the oldest teacher in the entire school. Sometimes he wore suspenders too, and he'd look like he was getting ready to go train some lions at the circus. Over time I think a lot of the kids resented him. Thought he was a hard ass for no reason. He expected a lot of everyone. And maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

"You boys do some wild shit. I know what goes on over the summers. I'm not dumb. None of these teachers are. We get it. We do. But cigarettes? You guys are better than that."

"A'ight, we won't do it again," Comb said.

"Sure you will, Mr. Bradley," Mr. Freamon said. "You sure will."

"It's Comb."

"Not here. Not now," Mr. Freamon said. "In my class you can go by Comb. You can be Mr. Cool to all the little girlies, and you can make funny jokes. You can wear your afro-pick in your hair. Whatever. That's fine and dandy," he continued. Mr. Freamon was pacing around the room. It was making me feel a little unsettled. Disappointed, even. Mr. Freamon deserved more than that. "But in here. In detention? No, sir. You are Mr. Bradley Jackson now. You lost that right."

Comb put his hands in a lump and rested his head on top of them, rolling his head toward me to give me some eyes. I turned my head away to look at Mr. Freamon.

"And you. Mr. Movie Star," Mr. Freamon said.

"Nah, I'm director," I said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Director. I guess I had it backwards, seeing as you trying to act tough with the cigarettes."

“It ain’t like that,” I said.

“Then what’s it like, huh?”

“Just something to do.”

“Just something to do,” Mr. Freamon repeated. “Something to do is going to the community pool. Something to do is playing video games with your friends. Something to do is hanging out watching movies with your girl. Sasha, right?” He looked at me, and his eyes got real beady. “Cigarettes? The last thing girls wanna taste, boys, let me tell you, is cigarettes.”

“I gotta go go the bathroom, man,” Comb said.

Mr. Freamon paused, laughed a little, and motioned for Comb to leave. “Be back in five or I’m calling your mother,” Mr. Freamon said.

“Shit, we ain’t got no phone,” Comb said.

“Just go to the damn bathroom and watch your language,” Mr Freamon said. He turned to me. “So, Mr. Bird.”

“I get to use my nickname in here?”

“Seeing as how we just two adults in here now, I don’t see why not,” Mr. Freamon said. “So, tell me more about this directing thing.”

“I don’t know, sir,” I said.

“Don’t call me sir. I got the gray up top, but just relax. We just talking, Bird.”

“A’ight,” I said. “I just always liked movies. I thought maybe I could do it, too. Maybe Sasha would be proud of me.”

“Ah, Sasha.”

“Well, and my mom. And maybe my dad, too.”

“I thought your daddy left while back?”

“Yeah, but he might see something I made someda,” I said. “Somewhere.”

“Listen here, Bird. Your daddy might be out there somewhere. But he ain’t coming back. He don’t care about you. And he don’t care about your mom. And he don’t care about the fact that you were outside today sucking on cancer’s dick. All he cares about is his goddamn self. I don’t mean to say that to upset you, or to dash your hopes, but someone gotta tell you that, and it damn well doesn’t need to be your mother.”

“That ain’t true. He out there. He’s just lost.”

“Lost?” Mr. Freamon said. “Lost? You think that nigga is lost? The hell he lost at?”

“In his head, man,” I said. “Like Bumbo. They both just lost.”

“That may be, Mr. Bird. But most likely, he ain’t. And most likely, you need to put your efforts into other people. Like this girl. Sasha. She was in my class a few years ago. Showed some promise when she wanted to. But she didn’t try very often.”

“Yeah, but she knows one day we gonna get out. Together. And we gonna do big stuff, you’ll see.”

“Okay, Mr. Bird,” Mr. Freamon said. “I hope one day I do see. I really, really do,” he was pacing now as he spoke. “But saying things and doing things are two different things. Just like we doing now. We talking. Or, you talking a lot. I’m acting. See the difference?”

“Nah, Mr. Freamon, I really don’t.”

“See, you talking like your daddy is lost. We both know that man ain’t coming back. And we both know you know he ain’t coming back. So don’t front with me, Mr. Bird. Because I ain’t got time for fronting, and I ain’t got time to waste on a boy as naïve as one who thinks his daddy just going to reappear after ten years. That making sense to you now?”

And he was right. I knew my dad wasn’t coming back. I didn’t need Mr. Freamon to tell me that, but I needed him to tell myself that. To be real. To stop fronting, as Mr. Freamon liked to say. People give Mr. Freamon a lot of shit for being old, but he with the times more than he gets credit for.

“I just want to make movies, Mr. Freamon,” I said. “I think I can be real good at it. Sometimes, when I’m alone, and sometimes when I’m not alone too, honestly, I think of my life as black and white. Like I’m the star, but I’m also directing. The star of my very own film. Like I’m God pulling the strings, striking my pen in the script, and using my camera to understand, and framing my life the way I want to be framed, and blocking the set the way it needs to be blocked, rigging the system so I can be the man I want to be. Trying to figure out why my dad left. Trying to figure out why Mom can’t just tell me the truth. Trying to figure why I can’t just tell Sasha I love her. Trying to figure out why I can’t just come to school and be mad fuckin’ good at it like I know I want to. Trying to figure out why I can’t look at my boys and get them to understand, and get them on board with me. And it ain’t even about that power, Mr. Freamon, I swear to God, I just want to understand. I gotta understand why I can’t do everything I want to do. Why Mr. Freamon, why?”

Mr. Freamon didn't say anything. He looked at me a long while behind his glasses that were down the bridge of his nose now. Usually he pushes them up every seven seconds when he's teaching, but he didn't touch them once during my speech. He looked at me like my words meant something, but he couldn't do anything about it. Like this was my film and he was just my audience, and I was doing this alone, by myself, on Poplar Street.

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Eleven days later there was a commotion at the house. The cannibal one. Comb and I ran up as the police had barricaded it off. The ambulance had a stretcher and three men were pushing it inside. It was a classic scene I always wanted to film. Sirens look fantastic in black and white, as the red and blue splash around, showcasing their power in a colorless world.

"What you think going on, bruv?" Comb said.

"Shit, probably just another fuckin' loser ODing," I said.

"Shit, yeah," Comb said. "You wanna stay and watch?"

"Nah, I seen this one before," I said.

Bumbo was waiting for us as we came back to the corner. I went to the trunk of the car to get his vials, but he stopped me. Told me he needed to talk to me. Alone, he said. Cass was giving him eyes, shooting his disgust into the heart of Bumbo. I told the guys I would be back in a bit and I walked down the street with Bumbo.

"There's something I have to show you," he said.

"Okay," I said laughing. "What is it? Ain't got to be so dramatic, Bum."

“Not being dramatic,” he said scratching what he had left of the hair on his face. He pinched a hair out, wincing as he did so. “It is important that you see.”

“A’ight, relax, Bum,” I said. “Show me then.”

“Not here.”

“The fuck you ain’t bring it for? I got to work Bumbo. Shit, I ain’t got time for your games today.”

“I couldn’t bring it.”

“Then I’ll catch up with you later, Bum.”

“No,” he said grabbing my arm as I turned to go. “Now. At the house.”

“You know Mom ain’t going to let you in,” I said.

“No. Poplar Street house.”

“Bumbo,” I said. “Get this through your fuckin’ head. I have to work. I’ll catch up with you later. I’m done tonight. Besides that house is swarmed right now.”

“Meet me back here at eight, then,” he said as he walked away, putting his hands into his pockets.

I walked back to the corner to Cass and Comb slapfighting. They stopped as I approached, and I wondered what the hell Bumbo needed to show me. I hadn’t talked to him in weeks. I mean, other than to give him his product allotment.

“What he want?” Cass asked.

“No clue. He was talking crazy,” I said. “You know how he is.”

“Yeah, I do.” Cass said. “Fuck him.” Cass spit through his teeth onto the street as he said it.

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At seven that night, I went home to grab my bike. The sky was gray and prepared to rain on me. I needed to make my weekly house deliveries that evening, but didn't want to get wet in the process. My mom was on the front porch as I walked up, and she was braiding Mr. Heinz's hair.

"Mr. H," I said. "Glad to catch you here." I opened the backpack and dropped two vials into his open palm. "I'll square up on the cash later, no worries."

He nodded and my mom smiled at me.

"Long day?" she asked.

"Nah, it was fine," I said. "What you giving him today?"

"Iverson zig-zags," Mr. Heinz said from the step below.

"Throwback," I said. "I like it."

"Go ahead and pay him for the braids instead of me," my mom said to Mr. Heinz. "Give him the twenty-five, the usual." She turned to me as Mr. Heinz fumbled for the money in his pockets. "I need groceries."

"Mom, shit, I ain't got time right now."

"Bird, I swear to God," she said.

"Yes ma'am," I said nodding out of the fight. "Bread, milk, what else?"

"That's it. Maybe some butter."

"A'ight. I'll grab it on my way home. But keep the twenty-five. I got it." I put the money into her pocket knowing she wouldn't take it from me. "What you want to drink? Faygo?"

“Yeah, cola,” she said.

I grabbed my bike from the side of the house and made my way to Sasha’s house. Her mom was designated for four vials of Red Rocks, two vials of Cola, and a baggie of Orange Tank Top. I pulled into the front of her house to find the front door already open. I set my bike down in the front yard and knocked lightly on the front door as I crept inside.

“Hello?”

“Who’s there?” I heard someone call out.

“It’s me, Bird.”

“Oh, Bird.”

Sasha’s mom appeared from the hallway. She was walking, which was weird. She looked at me quizzically, and I realized for the first time her hair was gray. I don’t think I had ever noticed it that way before. I’d never really seen her standing in the hallway before, never realized how looming and large of a woman she was. She sucked up the entire hallway like a boulder, stuck, and only needing the slightest bump to get rolling.

“Sasha ‘round?” I asked.

“You ain’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“I ain’t seen her for three days. I figured she was with you.”

“Nah, she ain’t been around the corner lately. I just thought she was busy,” I said.

“What you mean about hearing something?”



“Nothing,” she said. She didn’t seem concerned. Sasha wasn’t one to go missing, but she also didn’t come home every night either. “Your homeboy was here yesterday, too. I assumed he would’ve told you I hadn’t seen her when he asked me the same thing,” she said.

“Homeboy? What?”

“You know, that knucklehead with the awful dreads,” she said motioning to her hair with a disgusted smirk.

Cass? I didn’t know what Cass would be doing at Sasha’s house. Cass and Sasha never even spoke. When I brought up one around the other they usually just asked how I could possibly spend all my time with the other one.

“No, he ain’t said nothing,” I said. “But, thanks. I’ll catch you later.” I backed up to the door before realizing I hadn’t dropped off her vials. “And this,” I said placing it on the table.

She nodded and I left the house.

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I knew what had happened before I picked my bike up off the lawn. Three days ago there was a commotion at the old house on Poplar Street, and how could I not know right then? I think on some level I knew before her mother confirmed it. How could I not? They’d brought in a stretcher, this ambulance from the town over, and they’d brought someone out. Inside of a bag, so maybe it wasn’t a person, but it had to be a person. It wasn’t like in the films, just a hint of a splash of blues and reds from police car sirens. It was just an ambulance. No caution tape, and no barriers to block everyone out.

Just a single ambulance and three gloved paramedics, and a few policemen. They were in and out within five minutes. Not even enough time for a crowd to form.

Cass tried to talk to me that day, but I had to run home because my mom liked to spend Tuesday evenings just us. We watched the movies that night. Cass was acting weird. And I knew that, too, just like I knew that Sasha was missing because we hadn't talked in days. Told myself it was normal, but it wasn't. Not for three years had we gone that long without speaking. And it was her that was inside the house with a needle in her arm. It was her inside the bag. And it was her that was using. And it was me that was too stupid to know the marks on her arms were from using. That they were from the house on Poplar Street. It was her the paramedics removed from that house within five minutes. It was her that the crowd never formed to see. And it was me who knew and said nothing, and did nothing, and never told Sasha how I felt. And I don't know how it was so difficult for me to explain that I missed her all the time. And why it was so hard for me to tell her my dreams. About making the movies. About how I wanted her to be my star. And I wanted to be her rock. I had big dreams for us, but I couldn't say it the way that I wanted to. The way that I had told Mr. Freamon that time in detention. The detention I got because Comb and I had gym class to smoke cigarettes in the parking lot. And I told Mr. Freamon how I wanted to get out, but I didn't want to do it alone. I needed Sasha. And I needed Sasha to want to be with me, to work to be with me, to finish school in order to be with me. And that my whole life wasn't a movie no matter how hard I prayed it to be. And that no matter what, my life was real, and it wasn't an escape, and that making movies wasn't meant for kids like me. That making movies wasn't for people

who thought they were already inside of one. And that yelling “cut” doesn’t make something disappear. That life was permanent. And Mr. Freamon, he never said anything. He just listened like God when you praying.

### Afterword: Maintaining the Status Quo of the Mundane

“A story is simply a sequence of language that produces a chemical reaction in our bodies. When it’s done well, it causes sorrow, elation, awe, fascination” (Marcus xv). Ben Marcus writes these words in the collection of short stories he put together titled, *New American Stories*. In this collection, he compiles thirty-two short stories of varying modes, themes, emotions, time periods, and color. Thirty-two different stories directly correlated to make the reader feel a different emotion. This is where the short story becomes king for me: propelling its reader to *feel* in such a small, compounded space. Before the short story was king, the novel was king. And the American novel became the king when it began to focus on the quotidian, mundane, everyday activities that we as Americans do on a daily basis: eating, sleeping, working, loving. And this all began with one man: William Dean Howells. Though it was most likely never his intention, Howells gave birth to the gritty and dirty realism that I hope to evoke in my own fiction writing. His boring, “tea-cup tragedies,” as Frank Norris coined them, soon led to work fiction, leading to the grimy, and unlikable characters that permeate the fiction of the likes of Ben Marcus, Donald Ray Pollock, and Chuck Palahniuk, to name a few. In doing so, I was able to write the fiction that I hoped I could one day write. The mundane associated with the novels and essays of William Dean Howells in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the gritty and dirty contemporary fiction that permeates the fiction I write.

### **Blending the Old and the New: Howells, Norris, and Realism**

Amanda Claybaugh argues that “in Howells’s own novels realism was associated with [the] precise: a commitment to the everyday, the ordinary rather than the

extraordinary, the middle [and] not the extreme” (3). This was a shift from the conventional styles of class fiction in American literature where the extraordinary was in fact the main subject. As an example, in Herman Melville’s the reader follows Ishmael as he tracks one of the largest whales in history. Likewise, in Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the reader follows a man as he rises and falls throughout his career in the mineral paint business. Maybe some find paint more exciting than the epic battle between man and beast, but the majority, I would surmise, do not. This idea of dealing with the mundane, or rather, “the everyday” permeates even today, in short story collections such as Dustin M. Hoffman’s, *One-Hundred-Knuckled Fist*. In the story, “Can Picking,” the narrator and his daughter and a few other fringe friends—notably the Juggalo named Wilfred—collect cans after events to cash them in for ten cents a can. A way to survive: “We turned those coins to food, and we’ll turn those cans to coins” (Hoffman 35). This is a work story. Nothing is more “everyday” than a job. In Donald Atrim’s “Another Manhattan,” the “everyday” shifts into a dinner scene. A stark contrast from the gritty realism of Hoffman. There are no characters scavenging litter in order to survive. Instead, Atrim focuses on the white elite of New York City doing something they must do every day: eat. This is reminiscent still of Howells and his famous dinner scene in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The mundane, the status quo of daily life, the uninteresting that Howells made popular, his “realism,” as it may be, still populates the contemporary fiction. An anonymous review in *Athenaeum* in 1885 described Howells writing as reversion, the deterioration of the study of man: “from man to apes, from the apes to the worms, from the worms to the bacteria, from bacteria to—mud...it is the descent to dirt” (407). It is

this descent to dirt—this descent to the dirt within ourselves—that is so fascinating to myself as a writer. It’s why writers like Donald Ray Pollock get to exist. In his story, “Real Life,” the reader follows the narrator and his father around a drive-in movie theatre as they go to the bathroom between scenes of the film they’re viewing. In the bathroom, the narrator, a child around nine or ten-years-old, witnesses his father get into a fistfight with another father, and the children of the two men fight as well. The mundane task of reading about characters viewing a film becomes gritty, becomes real, and it becomes gross. In turn, it becomes interesting, and it becomes stimulating to his readers. “Real Life” is the “descent to dirt” that Howells stories started. Even if Howells only got us as literary fiction writers from humans to apes, his progress allowed writers like Pollock to finish the descent, to finish the job, and to bring us back to whence we came as humans: the disgusting, gritty, and gross dirt that we hail from.

Amanda Claybaugh continues by saying, “Howells thought of realism as the perpetual unmasking of literary convention, the continual reinvention of literary codes” (3). In short, Howells reinvented the literary convention of making novels and stories about massive incredulous happenings, and he gave credence to the boring things that everyday simpletons do: go to work, eat, be angry with their spouse—and he did this without ever doing it himself, yet he paved the way for writers and artists after him to do so. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, according to critic and historian Scott Casper, began as an idea that Howells developed in his want to mock the biographical novel, and how they all dealt with this magical rise from rags to riches. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Lapham is already on top of the world as the story begins. He’s already made his fortune, and the

story begins with an interview to a newspaper. There is no despicable childhood of poverty, there is no looming threat about whether or not his greatness will be achieved, it merely already is when the reader opens the first page. Instead, Howells bucks convention by having Lapham rehash his rise to greatness himself to Mr. Bartley Hubbard, a journalist doing a biographical journal on Mr. Lapham:

He went on to put several queries, and it was from Lapham's answers that he generalized the history of his childhood. "Mr. Lapham, although he did not dwell on his boyish trials and struggles, spoke of them with deep feeling and an abiding sense of their reality." This was what he added in the interview, and by the time he had got Lapham past the period where risen Americans are all pathetically alike in their narrow circumstances, their sufferings, and their aspirations, he had beguiled him into forgetfulness of the check he had received, and had him talking again in perfect enjoyment of his autobiography. (5)

This is in stark contrast to those who came before him—such as Benjamin Franklin—and how those who wished to write their own biography in the way that Silas Lapham is doing as the novel begins. Howells mocks them, shows his readers the process of writing one's own biography, and how it warps the final product. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Mr. Hubbard plays the role of the general public, stating to Lapham, "A man can't make a greater mistake with a reporter than to hold back anything out of modesty...we've got so much modesty of our own that we can temper almost any statement" (11).

William Dean Howells also did something with his novels that had not been done previously. He made his readers think. Not just about the novels themselves, but about their own lives. People were responding to his literature in a visceral way that had not been seen before. Critic C. Hugh Holman argues in his essay, “Of Everything the Unexplained and Irresponsible Specimen: Notes on how to Read American Realism,” that Howells characters “were comprehended with such clarity and completeness that their common qualities were shared by all mankind” (489). Furthermore, in the critical anthology put together by Don L. Cook, he states that (emphasis added mine), “the literary realism that Howells practiced and defended [resulted in] important changes in jurisprudence, economics, history, applied theology, social legislation and education and **in an explosion of interest in new fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology**” (486). In essence, Howells led to a greater interest from the general public in critical areas of study that would further literature, albeit indirectly. The renewed interest in psychology was not driven by literature, but beginning to dive into the psychological ramifications that characters endure in novels is an indirect result of Howells’s obsession with realist literature. And, furthermore, with that interest in dissecting previously written novels’ characters, novelists began writing novels that explored the psychology of their characters even further. Without Howells, it is possible to envision a timeline in American literature without Ralph Ellison, or without Richard Wright, or without Zadie Smith. Both novels, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Wright’s *Native Son*, rely heavily on psychology, and as well as realism. *Native Son* practically requires the reader to approach it with prior knowledge of W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of*



*Black Folks*, a book entailing just what it is to be black in America. Without the concept of “double-consciousness,” that is, African-Americans “see[ing] himself through the revelation of the other world,” the white world, then a reader will struggle to understand just why Bigger Thomas can never learn to fly, and why Bigger Thomas has to burn Mary Dalton’s body after he accidentally suffocates her in her own bed while she is drunk (Du Bois 568). James Baldwin took this one step further, claiming that “no American Negro exists who does not have his own private Bigger Thomas living in [his] skull” (New York Times). C. Hugh Holman argues that “there has been, and still is, a significant movement in American fiction which values very highly the artist’s ability to reproduce actuality as a sufficient and admirable end in itself...for Howells, this actuality is largely social and direct” (491). One of Howells’s goals all along was to get his reader’s to respond to the work, to think about themselves, to apply what happens to themselves, and to get his reader’s to think about something other than the literature, and to then turn around and apply it to said literature. Without Howells, we as readers and scholars may have never been given the genius of Ralph Ellison, of Richard Wright, of Zadie Smith, of countless other authors, and that would have been a damn shame.

Ultimately, for the sake of my argument, the greatest contribution that William Dean Howells made to literature was angering Frank Norris by shunning romanticism and embracing realism. Critic Andrew Hook writes that “Norris believed that the novelist should aim at the bringing together of the modes of realism and romance” (158). Norris still believed in romantic literature, in stark contrast to Howells. Norris was not actually opposed to the way Howells wrote, or cared to write, it seems, but instead merely wished

to adapt, to “make new,” the way that Howells had grown accustomed to. He was essentially “creating a way of writing combining an accurate rendering of the surface details of life (realism) with an understanding of the underlying, general truths about man and nature (romance)” (Hook 158). And while Emile Zola is considered the founder of naturalism, Frank Norris achieved its highest importance with his novel, *McTeague*. For me, there is no character as grimy and despicable in early literature than McTeague. Early in the novel, McTeague resists urges to sexually assault an unconscious woman during a dental exam:

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. To reason with it was beyond him. He could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert. (22)

The animal instincts of McTeague overtake him, as if bringing him back to the days of the caveman. He cannot “reason with it” because he has no reason. The classic ape with a club and no brain. Naturalism in its rawest forms shows the animalistic nature of humankind, and this, perhaps, is why I find myself so enamored with contemporary literature. Authors such as Ben Marcus and Donald Ray Pollock are the modern day Frank Norris, and this all began as Emile Zola and Frank Norris attempted to shun the works of William Dean Howells. They did just as I’d been taught when I first entered Winthrop University’s graduate program: find an argument you disagree with and work against it. And this birthed naturalism, which gave Frank Norris, which gave Donald Ray Pollock, which gave me a reason to read, a reason to write.

### **Fifteen Minutes: My Writing**

This awkwardly leads to my own writing. To understand my writing, I find it imperative to understand why I read. Or more accurately, why I read what I read. When I was young, I played video game and watched movies because nothing ever really happened in my life outside of normal circumstances. The daily happenings of my life felt unimportant, boring, and unexciting, to say the least. Now that I'm old(er), I've begun to realize how quickly books become the main medium of escape. In particular, the short story. I no longer have the time to spend ten hours completing a video game. Or even three hours to sit through the latest Tarantino blockbuster. But fifteen minutes? Everyone has fifteen minutes. In his introduction to the anthology, *New American Stories*, Ben Marcus describes the desire for short stories as this:

When I want to be ambushed, captured, thrust into a strange and vivid world, and tossed aloft until I cannot stand it, until everything is at stake and life feels almost unbearably vivid, I do something simple. I read short stories. (xiv)

I find this description accurate. No other medium puts the user through a series of emotions, a series of what feels like thrashing body movements, in the same way that a short story does.

When I think back to the things that meant the most to me growing up, the things that affected me most, it is always literature. Never film, or a game, or a television show, or even real human interaction. As a freshman, I spent my first year as an undergraduate

trying to find out what I wanted to do with my life. I took random 101 classes to find out what I was interested in. I wasn't like my brother, who knew he wanted to be an accountant when he was twelve years old. And I wasn't my sister, who wanted to work in advertising and promotion when she was fourteen. I was simply a kid who liked to "do stuff," but none of that "stuff" translated into what my father would call a real career. My second semester at the University of North Carolina—Charlotte, not the prestigious one—I took a class on a whim called Writing About Literature. In this class Mr. Tony Jackson, the professor, assigned us one book for the entire semester: *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. After that semester I became an English major much to the dismay of my loved ones, and that path had led me here.

Though I have always enjoyed reading, and always enjoyed the emotions that come with it, I never thought of myself as a writer. More specifically, a fiction writer. Spending the last six or seven years truly exploring, studying, and attempting to understand the medium led me to one glaring fact: everything that happens is important. The mundane, the "everyday" as Howells referred to it, matters. They matter because language is important. All the literature that had moved me to tears, to anger, and to happiness, they all did so because the language was strong, and the language made the content interesting. Marcus describes language as "the most durable feeling in the world" (xv). He believes that "the language of fiction, which generally does not occur out loud: razored, miraculously placed, set like stones into staggeringly complex patterns so that, somehow, life, or something more distilled and intense, more consistently moving, gets made" (xv). Language is the blood, and short stories are merely the veins, pumping it

throughout the body, making it feel anger, sadness, happiness, or whatever feeling the author wishes to pull from their reader, involuntary or not.

Looking specifically at my own fiction, the story that jumps out to me is “People Sitting in the Dark.” This story features a narrator, Gil, returning home to Pittsburgh to visit his family that he left when he was sixteen due to hostile circumstances. Their relationship is scarred, yet he returns home to visit his dying step-dad. Most of this story—as well as a majority of the characters shown throughout this collection—began as real-life entities that I know and see on a daily basis. Every character has a little bit of me inside of them. Some, such as John, Gil’s older brother, is a real-life scumbag. My first step in revising this story after countless drafts, was to distance myself from the piece and create characters, not people. Benjamin Percy wrote in an essay for *The Writer’s Chronicle*, that “if your writing ‘sounds like writing,’ then your reader will be aware they are reading a story, and when they are aware they are reading a story, the dream dissolves” (86). In essence, I had dissolved the dream of the story for myself before I even began. I had envisioned characters that were real people in my life, and I expected my reader to be able to do the same. Instead of fleshing out these characters, giving them back stories, giving them emotions, giving them actual problems within the confines of the text, I had expected my readers to understand them on the same level that I understand their real-life counterparts. Instead, Gil became less like me, and instead just became that-one-guy-in-my-story. All of a sudden, he was layered. He was complex. He had problems. He had motivations. He wasn’t just another Trent Chabot, or another Holden Caulfield. He was Gil, the guy from “People Sitting in the Dark,” and he had a

motivation: to connect with his step-father one last time, and to be there. “We were there,” as he adamantly states in the story’s closing paragraph.

Benjamin Percy also states in his article that “your ultimate goal, as a storyteller, should be to sweep the reader away,” (86). I attempted to do so by focusing on the mundane, the “everyday,” and attempting to make it interesting. Sticking with the same story, Gil’s step-father recounts the time he and Gil went to a baseball game when Gil was about six years old. He’s telling the story, getting angrier and angrier about the absurdity of the baseball strike, and Gil just listens. It’s a rather boring story. Nothing much of note happens. It is merely a baseball game. A retelling of a baseball story, at that, and yet it comes across as something a little bit more than that. The story is layered, fleshes out the characters of both Gil and his step-father just a little bit more. Dustin M. Hoffman once told me that one of the interesting things about blue collar workers and writing work-themed fiction is that the characters are unlikely saps, and unlikely storytellers. These rugged grown men, whom society has labeled brutes, or working stiffs, or even unintelligent, have some of the wildest tales behind their eyes. And when they get to tell them, they buck expectation, and it can be incredibly beautiful. This is how I viewed Gil’s step-father: a misunderstood man with a story to tell, and he finally got his audience with Gil in the closing scenes of that story. I don’t claim to be sweeping my reader away—I have not reached my peak confidence level in my own writing just yet—but I certainly hope my readers can be as mesmerized by Gil’s step-father as I found myself writing it. Despite being a fairly unlikable character, he has elegance and beauty just the same. Much like McTeague, despite his animalistic instincts and the murder he

commits in the novel, the reader never feels outright rage for him. Perhaps sympathy or a smidge of dislike, but never contempt or hatred. They are merely vessels of emotion, performing in the language of the story, performing the mundane tasks of living, and being important and beautiful all the while.

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